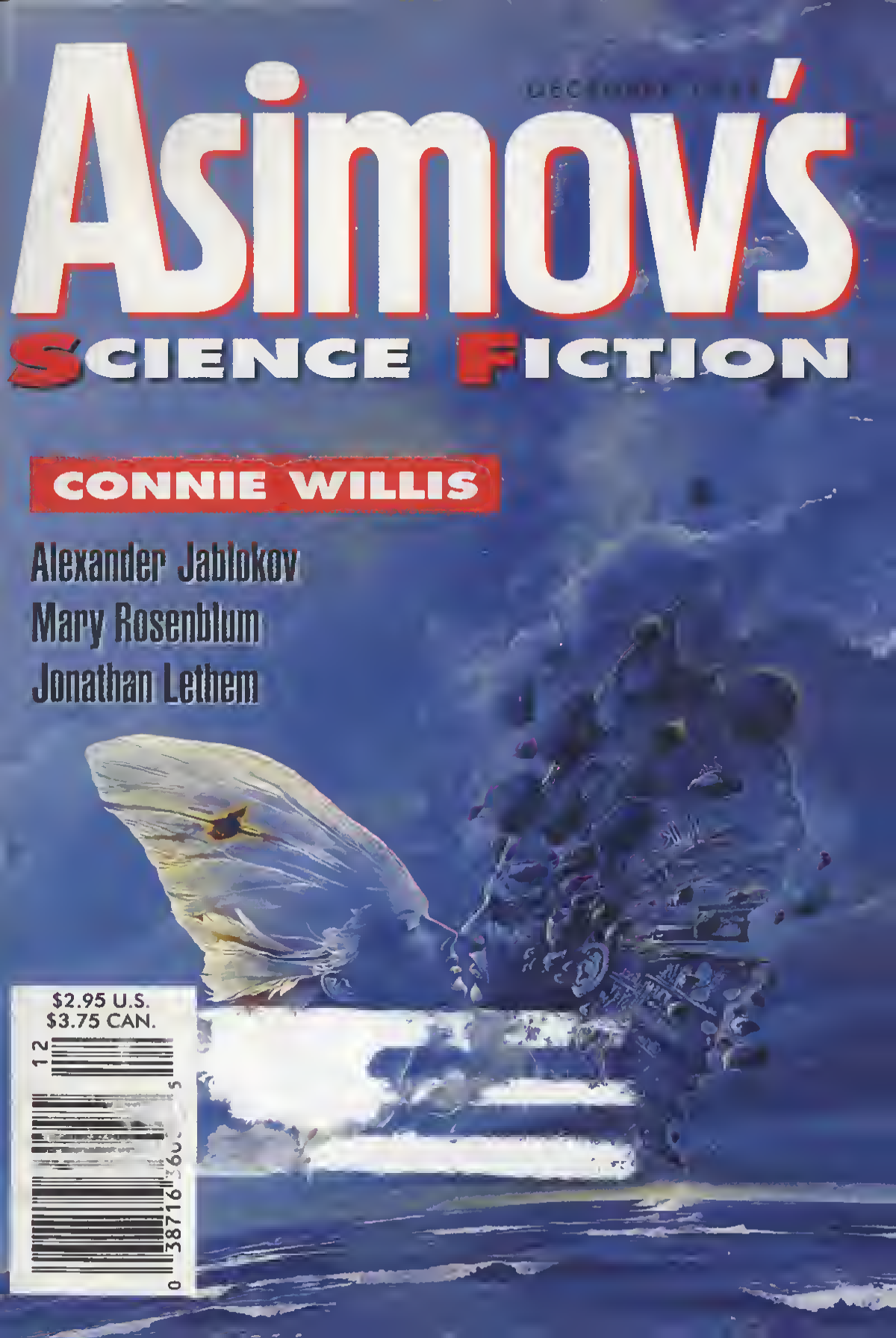
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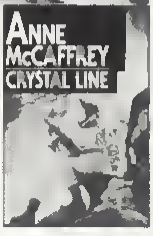
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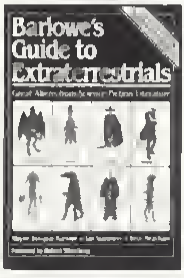
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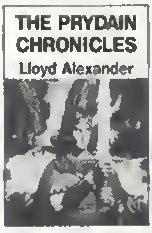
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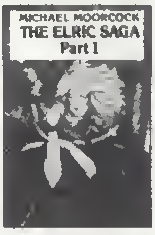
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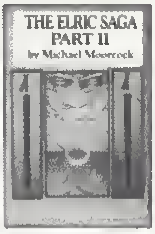
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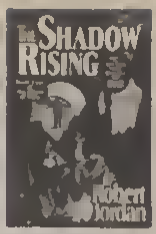
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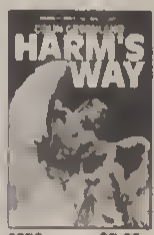
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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1993 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

TEN YEARS AFTER

by Pat Cadigan

Has it *really* been ten years since cyberpunk SF (to use the instantly recognizable term) began sending its first ripples through the SF field? Well, more or less. It's tenish, at least, so what the hell, let's call it a decade. And during that entire time, I've refrained from writing manifestos, articles, position papers, or even letters to the editor—any editor—for whatever reason. One more voice in the controversy was only going to turn up the noise level, I reasoned, and besides, I was writing and I had a baby to take care of. When you're trying to meet a deadline and you have to get up for a two A.M. feeding, your response to somebody's diatribe is less along the lines of *My esteemed colleague is stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins* and more like *For chrissakes, doesn't this bozo have a life?*

Anyway, it's hard to run commentary on something while it's going on—it's hindsight that is the clearer vision because the scope is always larger. You see, finally, the elements of the big picture—that is, the *bigger* picture—that you are inevitably part of and only then is a real understanding possible. (Not necessarily probable, but possible.)

Now, I thought about this a lot before I wrote it. Did I have anything to say about cyberpunk SF that would be at all enlightening? Who would care, and did that matter? And anyway, I don't write nonfiction. Hell, these days I can barely write *letters*. The book's late (the book's *always* late), I owe three people short fiction, and the world has managed to keep turning without my pronouncements on the subject of cyberpunk, so why fix it if it ain't broke?

(At this point, I don't know what comes next—I may have talked myself out of writing this article. Stay tuned.)

Well, let's face it—there are three inexorable human drives: the drive to reproduce, the drive to rewrite someone else's copy, and the drive to shoot your mouth off. (In fact, in the early days of the field, it was the first two drives getting intertwined that would result in the third—which is to say, writers who felt they'd been screwed by editors changing their text would complain loudly. See? Every kind of life has its own ecology.) So, I'm

going to shoot my mouth off, an activity that has a long and honorable tradition in this field, and in the field of literature in general. But I would venture to say that SF in particular has benefitted from the willingness of certain, uh, mouth-shooter-off-ers to get up and say, "Hey, that emperor's *naked!*"—and others to say, "No, not naked, just tacky!", and still others to say, "That's no emperor, that's your mother!"

In this case, however, I'm here to tell you that while everyone was arguing about what the emperor was wearing, the government was toppled in a swift and silent coup, and the emperor has been replaced by a global anarchy that doesn't care what any of us thinks.

Which is to say, the word c*yberpunk* has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and it ain't just for SF any more.

(Is it a measure of my provincialism to talk about an American weekly magazine? Well, see the twenty-first century edition, in which periodicals like *Time* go electronic on the international nets and become market-specific rather than nation-specific, to appear as hard copy only by individual request.)

The first reaction I heard to the *Time* cover story within the field was: "That must mean cyberpunk is dead for sure." Must be an echo in this continuum because I've been hearing that one since *Mirrorshades* came out. People have been wishing this movement—a

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misnomer—dead practically from the beginning, for a wide variety of reasons, some stupider than others. Others have tried to abort it retroactively by insisting there was never any movement in the first place and it's all just a marketing gimmick. And still others try to pre-empt it by insisting that Alfred Bester did it all first, so it's all old news to begin with.

Well, you can get up every morning, face the east, and repeat the mantra, *The moon is made of green cheese* fifty times before breakfast every day of your life, and I promise you that this will have absolutely no effect on the moon whatsoever. I also promise you that the moon's seeming refusal to alter is not a personal affront to you and all the other green cheese lovers.

Popular culture—for many people, this term verges on the obscene, conjuring images of *People* magazine, Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Geraldo with a broken nose. It is enough to send anyone screaming into the streets. But this is because *popular culture* is one of those terms like *clothes*—it's only specific enough to let you know you won't be discussing the principal exports of Paraguay or the life-cycle of anaerobic bacteria.

When I use the term *popular culture*, I am referring to contemporary artistic attempts, successful and otherwise, that mirror current events and/or cultural shifts. Collectively, this is what all art does. Even bad art.

In America, the first amendment guarantees our right to see lots of art, bad, not so bad, and pretty good. The all-pervasiveness of mass media pretty much ensures that even the most ethereal artists can't help being influenced to some degree by the tenor of their times. These days, you really have to go out of your way to avoid the mass media, television in particular—and if you did, the life you would live would be, in most cases, highly abnormal in comparison to the society around you.

Now, it has been chic for a number of years to talk about how much better off we would be without television, and what a great cultural wasteland it is. But—and I feel a little silly saying this, as if I'm explaining why you ought to know the alphabet in order—television isn't any more responsible for its condition than your bathroom mirror is for the way you look when you get up in the morning. If you don't like what you see, throwing out the mirror is one way to handle it but frankly, it also means you're an idiot.

Over the past four or so decades that television has been generally available, its role has enlarged from amuser/babysitter to eyewitness/testifier—who would have thought that the thing that put "I Love Lucy" in our living rooms would also put the Viet Nam War there as well? Television, that propagator and distributor of popular culture, was the first modern medium that could not only docu-



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ment our cultural shifts but instigate them as well.

Among other things, this does tend to mean that people who grew up with television are quite different than people who grew up without it, and if you would like to know exactly how someone in the latter group can be at an extreme disadvantage by failing to adapt, get in touch with George Herbert Walker Bush, who has a lot more spare time to answer his mail these days than he used to.

Which is the long way round to another obvious point: cyberpunk SF (still using the instantly recognizable term here, and I refuse to apologize for it) was able to come into its present existence *only after* the desk-top computer entered the mainstream, general use the way television did back in the 1950s. The PC and the TV have since been engaged in a *ménage à trois* with the telephone, and the fact that the three of them have not yet merged into one creature is only because the technical details haven't been worked out yet.

Does that sound like some kind of wild cyberpunk SF scenario, with computers becoming not just sentient but horny? Well, don't blame me, I just work here.

Cyberpunk SF was the response to the start of the desk-top computer era—speculative fiction concerning new developments in technology. Does that description sound familiar? ("Oh, no, she's made cyberpunk sound *respectable!*" Chill out, homey—it's only a description of the thing, not the thing itself. Like the man said, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe.*) Of course, it had its own generational and temporal characteristics, just like anything else—Buddy Holly and Eddie Van Halen, for example, probably picked up their guitars for similar reasons, but the sounds they chose to make are completely different. But then, if you enjoy the sounds of one or the other—or both—is it really because you've made a tedious study of the motivations involved?

In any case, SF is and has always been a popular culture art form in that it has mirrored the tenor of its time even while trying to extrapolate—sometimes quite successfully—from that time. Cyberpunk SF came into existence because several writers were responding to a cultural shift—without fully realizing it at first. This is the nature of the initial artistic response, in that it is spontaneous, not calculated. In any case, because of developments in general-use technology, what has become known as cyberpunk SF was inevitable, and you cannot wish it away or invalidate it any more than you can insist cable TV doesn't exist by ripping out the connecting cord—or never having it put in.

The appearance of cyberpunk as *Time* magazine cover story material means that the cultural shift is still going on, and is affecting the lives of more people, and more different kinds of people—like the advent of television. Science fiction

got a mention in the *Time* article, but it was not the primary focus of the article. Cyberpunk SF turns out to be "SF about cyberpunk things" but then, it always was.

Critics, adherents, writers, observers, readers, editors, and the marketing guys, all of us together made this important initial mistake—we kept saying cyberpunk was about science fiction. It isn't, and *it never was*. To think otherwise is like believing America's space program was about science fiction.

The culture didn't "catch up" —not exactly, anyway. To put it that way would seem to imply that the culture was following the science fiction deliberately, and that simply is not, has never been true. Had there been no SF about cyberpunk, we would still have this same cover story in *Time* magazine, probably with that same word, "cyberpunk," because we would still have desk-top computers, computer nets, hackers, viruses, and all the rest of it. As there are millions of people who go into bookstores every day without ever stopping to browse the science fiction section, there are millions of people who use networks every day and never read science fiction.

In other words, Galileo is still right—the earth goes around the sun, not vice versa.

Eventually, as many people have pointed out, cyberpunk concerns will be absorbed into the mainstream; many SF readers and writers insist that the conventions and themes of cyberpunk SF have already been absorbed into "mainstream science fiction" (if you can believe *that* term). And I have to say that I would be shocked if they were not.

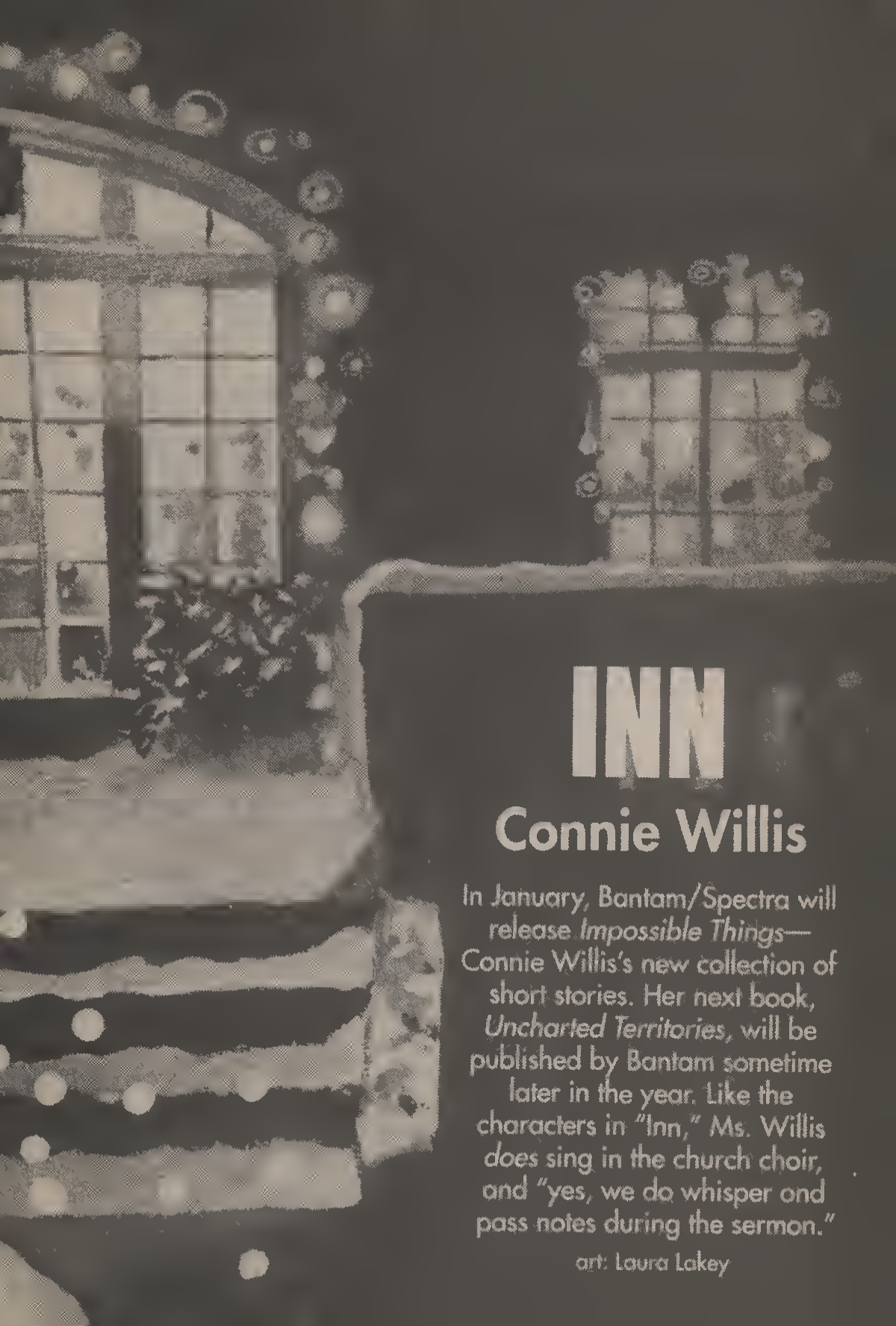
As for cyberpunk SF—rather than SF about cyberpunk things —that's going to be one hell of a magical mystery tour. Eventually we *must* change from observers to participants. I think of Hypertext and interactivity and I say let's push it and see how far we can go into a landscape morphing into near-unrecognizability for the children of Gutenberg.

Cultural shift is never about SF, but vice versa—and cyberpunk, being a cultural shift rather than a form of science fiction, cannot be declared either alive or dead because nobody owns it.

Nobody owns it and everybody participates. So you can say you're tired of it, or you don't like it any more, or you're bored because all the new wore off, or you want to do something else . . . but you can't say it's over. The cultural shift is still in progress; you can ignore it at your peril, or you can stay alert and see what's coming up next.

Pat Cadigan's collection of short stories, Dirty Work, *will be out soon from Ziesing. Ms. Cadigan also has a new science fiction novel coming out from Tor Books.*●





INN

Connie Willis

In January, Bantam/Spectra will release *Impossible Things*—Connie Willis's new collection of short stories. Her next book, *Uncharted Territories*, will be published by Bantam sometime later in the year. Like the characters in "Inn," Ms. Willis *does* sing in the church choir, and "yes, we do whisper ond pass notes during the sermon."

art: Laura Lakey

The Christmas Eve Service. The organ played the last notes of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and the choir sat down. Reverend Wall hobbled slowly to the pulpit, clutching his sheaf of yellowed typewritten sheets.

In the choir, Dee leaned over to Sharon and whispered, "Here we go. Twenty-four minutes and counting."

On Sharon's other side, Virginia murmured, " 'And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.' "

Reverend Wall set the papers on the pulpit, looked rheumily out over the congregation, and said, " 'And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.' " He paused.

"We know nothing of that journey up from Nazareth," Virginia whispered.

"We know nothing of that journey up from Nazareth," Reverend Wall said, in a wavering voice, "what adventures befell the young couple, what inns they stopped at along the way. All we know is that on a Christmas Eve like this one they arrived in Bethlehem, and there was no room for them at the inn."

Virginia was scribbling something on the margin of her bulletin. Dee started to cough. "Do you have any cough drops?" she whispered to Sharon.

"What happened to the ones I gave you last night?" Sharon whispered back.

"Though we know nothing of their journey," Reverend Wall said, his voice growing stronger, "we know much of the world they lived in. It was a world of censuses and soldiers, of bureaucrats and politicians, a world busy with property and rules and its own affairs."

Dee started to cough again. She rummaged in the pocket of her music folder and came up with a paper-wrapped cough drop. She unwrapped it and popped it in her mouth.

". . . a world too busy with its own business to even notice an insignificant couple from far away," Reverend Wall intoned.

Virginia passed her scribbled-on bulletin to Sharon. Dee leaned over to read it, too. It read, "What happened here last night after the rehearsal? When I came home from the mall, there were police cars outside."

Dee grabbed the bulletin and rummaged in her folder again. She found a pencil, scribbled, "Somebody broke into the church," and passed it across to Sharon and Virginia.

"You're kidding," Virginia whispered. "Were they caught?"

"No," Sharon said.

The rehearsal on the twenty-third was supposed to start at seven. By a quarter to eight the choir was still standing at the back of the sanctuary waiting to sing the processional, the shepherds and angels were bouncing off the walls, and Reverend Wall, in his chair behind the pulpit, had

nodded off. The assistant minister, Reverend Farrison, was moving poinsettias onto the chancel steps to make room for the manger, and the choir director, Rose Henderson, was on her knees hammering wooden bases onto the cardboard palm trees. They had fallen down twice already.

"What do you think are the chances we'll still be here when it's time for the Christmas Eve service to start tomorrow night?" Sharon said, leaning against the sanctuary door.

"I can't be," Virginia said, looking at her watch. "I've got to be out at the mall before nine. Megan suddenly announced she wants Senior Prom Barbie."

"My throat feels terrible," Dee said, feeling her glands. "Is it hot in here, or am I getting a fever?"

"It's hot in these *robes,*" Sharon said. "Why *are* we wearing them? This is a rehearsal."

"Rose wanted everything to be exactly like it's going to be tomorrow night at the Christmas Eve Service."

"If I'm exactly like this tomorrow night, I'll be dead," Dee said, trying to clear her throat. "I *can't* get sick. I don't have any of the presents wrapped, and I haven't even *thought* about what we're having for Christmas dinner."

"At least you *have* presents," Virginia said. "I have eight people left to buy for. Not counting Senior Prom Barbie."

"I don't have anything done. Christmas cards, shopping, wrapping, baking, nothing, and Bill's parents are coming," Sharon said. "Come o*n,* let's get this show on the road."

Rose and one of the junior choir angels hoisted the palm trees to standing. They listed badly to the right, as if Bethlehem were experiencing a hurricane. "Is that straight?" Rose called to the back of the church.

"Yes," Sharon said.

"Lying in church," Dee said. "Tsk, tsk."

"All right," Rose said, picking up a bulletin. "Listen up, everybody. Here's the order of worship. Introit by the brass quartet, processional, opening prayer, announcements—Reverend Farrison, is that where you want to talk about the 'Least of These' Project?"

"Yes," Reverend Farrison said. She walked to the front of the sanctuary. "And can I make a quick announcement right now?" She turned and faced the choir. "If anybody has anything else to donate, you need to bring it to the church by tomorrow morning at nine," she said briskly. "That's when we're going to deliver them to the homeless. We still need blankets and canned goods. Bring them to the fellowship hall."

She walked back down the aisle, and Rose started in on her list again. "Announcements, 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,' Reverend Wall's sermon—"

Reverend Wall nodded awake at his name. "Ah," he said and hobbled toward the pulpit, clutching a sheaf of yellowed typewritten papers.

"Oh, no," Sharon said. "Not a Christmas pageant *and* a sermon. We'll be here forever."

"Not *a* sermon," Virginia said. "*The* sermon. All twenty-four minutes of it. I've got it memorized. He's given it every year since he came."

"Longer than that," Dee said. "I swear last year I heard him say something about World War I."

" 'And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city,' " Reverend Wall said. " 'And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth.' "

"Oh, no," Sharon said. "He's going to give the whole thing right now."

"We know nothing of that journey up from Bethlehem," he said.

"Thank you, Reverend Wall," Rose said. "After the sermon, the choir sings, 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' and Mary and Joseph—"

"What message does the story of their journey hold for us?" Reverend Wall said, picking up steam.

Rose was hurrying up the aisle and up the chancel steps. "Reverend Wall, you don't need to run through the sermon right now."

"What does it say to us," he asked, "struggling as we are to recover from a world war?"

Dee nudged Sharon.

"Reverend *Wall*," Rose said, reaching the pulpit. "I'm afraid we don't have time to go through your whole sermon right now. We need to run through the pageant now."

"Ah," he said, and gathered up his papers.

"All right," Rose said. "The choir sings, 'O Little Town of Bethlehem,' and Mary and Joseph, you come down the center aisle."

Mary and Joseph, wearing bathrobes and Birkenstocks, assembled themselves at the back of the sanctuary, and started down the center aisle.

"No, no, Mary and Joseph, not that way," Rose said. "The wise men from the East have to come down the center aisle, and you're coming up from Nazareth. You two come down the side aisle."

Mary and Joseph obliged, taking the aisle at a trot.

"No, no, slow *down*," Rose said. "You're tired. You've walked all the way from Nazareth. Try it again."

They raced each other to the back of the church and started again, slower at first and then picking up speed.

"The congregation won't be able to see them," Rose said, shaking her head. "What about lighting the side aisle? Can we do that, Reverend Farrison?"

"She's not here," Dee said. "She went to get something."

"I'll go get her," Sharon said, and went down the hall.

Miriam Hoskins was just going in the adult Sunday school room with a paper plate of frosted cookies. "Do you know where Reverend Farrison is?" Sharon asked her.

"She was in the office a minute ago," Miriam said, pointing with the plate.

Sharon went down to the office. Reverend Farrison was standing at

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the desk, talking on the phone. "How soon can the van be here?" She motioned to Sharon she'd be a minute. "Well, can you find out?"

Sharon waited, looking at the desk. There was a glass dish of paper-wrapped cough drops next to the phone, and beside it a can of smoked oysters and three cans of water chestnuts. Probably for the "Least of These" Project, she thought ruefully.

"Fifteen minutes? All right. Thank you," Reverend Farrison said, and hung up. "Just a minute," she told Sharon and went out to the outside door. She opened it and leaned out. Sharon could feel the icy air as she stood there. She wondered if it had started snowing.

"The van will be here in a few minutes," Reverend Farrison said to someone outside.

Sharon looked out the stained-glass panels on either side of the door, trying to see who was out there.

"It'll take you to the shelter," Reverend Farrison said. "No, you'll have to wait outside." She shut the door. "Now," she said, turning to Sharon, "what did *you* want?"

Sharon said, still looking out the window, "They need you in the sanctuary." It was starting to snow. The flakes looked blue through the glass.

"I'll be right there," Reverend Farrison said. "I was just taking care of some homeless. That's the second couple we've had tonight. We always get them at Christmas. What's the problem? The palm trees?"

"What?" Sharon said, still looking at the snow.

Reverend Farrison followed her gaze. "The shelter van's coming for them in a few minutes," she said. "We can't let them stay in here unsupervised. First Methodist's had their collection stolen twice in the last month, and we've got all the donations for the 'Least of These' project in there." She gestured toward the fellowship hall.

I thought they were for the homeless, Sharon thought. "Couldn't they just wait in the sanctuary or something?" she said.

Reverend Farrison sighed. "Letting them in isn't doing them a kindness. They come here instead of the shelter because the shelter confiscates their liquor." She started down the hall. "What did they need me for?"

"Oh," Sharon said, "the lights. They wanted to know if they could get lights over the side aisle for Mary and Joseph."

"I don't know," she said. "The lights in this church are such a mess." She stopped at the bank of switches next to the stairs that led down to the choir room and the Sunday school rooms. "Tell me what this turns on."

She flicked the switch. The hall light went off. She switched it back on and tried another one.

"That's the light in the office," Sharon said, "and the downstairs hall, and that one's the adult Sunday school room."

"What's this one?" Reverend Farrison said.

There was a yelp from the choir members. Kids screamed.

"The sanctuary," Sharon said. "Okay, that's the side aisle lights." She called down to the sanctuary. "How's that?"

"Fine," Rose called. "No, wait, the organ's off."

Reverend Farrison flicked another switch, and the organ came on with a groan.

"Now the side lights are off," Sharon said, "and so's the pulpit light."

"I told you they were a mess," Reverend Farrison said. She flicked another switch. "What did that do?"

"It turned the porch light off."

"Good. We'll leave it off. Maybe it will discourage any more homeless from coming," she said. "Reverend Wall let a homeless man wait inside last week, and he relieved himself on the carpet in the adult Sunday school room. We had to have it cleaned." She looked reprovingly at Sharon. "With these people, you can't let your compassion get the better of you."

No, Sharon thought. Jesus did, and look what happened to him.

"The innkeeper could have turned them away," Reverend Wall intoned, twenty minutes into the Christmas Eve sermon. "He was a busy man, and his inn was full of travelers. He could have shut the door on Mary and Joseph."

Virginia leaned across Sharon to Dee. "Did whoever broke in take anything?"

"No," Sharon said.

"Whoever it was urinated on the floor in the nursery," Dee whispered, and Reverend Wall trailed off confusedly and looked over at the choir.

Dee began coughing loudly, trying to smother it with her hand. He smiled vaguely at her and started again. "The innkeeper could have turned them away."

Dee waited a minute, and then opened her hymnal to her bulletin and began writing on it. She passed it to Virginia, who read it and then passed it back to Sharon.

"Reverend Farrison thinks some of the homeless got in," it read. "They tore up the palm trees, too. Ripped the bases right off. Can you imagine anybody doing something like that?"

"As the innkeeper found room for Mary and Joseph that Christmas Eve long ago," Reverend Wall said, building to a finish, "let us find room in our hearts for Christ. Amen."

The organ began the intro to "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and Mary and Joseph appeared at the back with Miriam Berg. She adjusted Mary's white veil and whispered something to them. Joseph pulled at his glued-on beard.

"What route did they finally decide on?" Virginia whispered. "In from the side or straight down the middle?"

"Side aisle," Sharon whispered.

The choir stood up. " 'O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee

lie,' " they sang. " 'Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.' "

Mary and Joseph started up the side aisle, taking the slow, measured steps Rose had coached them in, side by side. No, Sharon thought. That's not right. They didn't look like that. Joseph should be a little ahead of Mary, protecting her, and her hand should be on her stomach, protecting the baby.

They eventually decided to wait on the decision of how Mary and Joseph would come until the end of the rehearsal, and started through the pageant. Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the inn, and the innkeeper, grinning broadly, told them there wasn't any room.

"Patrick, don't look so happy," Rose said. "You're supposed to be in a bad mood. You're busy and tired, and you don't have any rooms left."

Patrick attempted a scowl. "I have no rooms left," he said, "but you can stay in the stable." He led them over to the manger, and Mary knelt down behind it.

"Where's the baby Jesus?" Rose said.

"He's not due till tomorrow night," Virginia whispered.

"Does anybody have a baby doll they can bring?" Rose asked.

One of the angels raised her hand, and Rose said, "Fine. Mary, use the blanket for now, and, choir, you sing the first verse of 'Away in a Manger.' Shepherds," she called to the back of the sanctuary, "as *soon* as 'Away in a Manger' is over, come up and stand on *this* side." She pointed.

The shepherds picked up an assortment of hockey sticks, broom handles, and canes taped to one-by-twos and adjusted their headcloths.

"All right, let's run through it," Rose said. "Organ?"

The organ played the opening chord, and the choir stood up.

"A-way," Dee sang and started to cough, choking into her hand.

"Do—cough—drop?" she managed to gasp out between spasms.

"I saw some in the office," Sharon said, and ran down the chancel steps, down the aisle, past the shepherds, and out into the hall.

It was dark, but she didn't want to take the time to try and find the right switch. She could more or less see her way by the lights from the sanctuary, and she thought she knew right where the cough drops were.

The office lights were off, too, and the porch light Reverend Farrison had turned off to discourage the homeless. She opened the office door, felt her way over to the desk and patted around till she found the glass dish. She grabbed a handful of cough drops and felt her way back out into the hall.

The choir was singing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," but after two measures they stopped, and in the sudden silence Sharon heard knocking.

She started for the door and then hesitated, wondering if this was the same couple Reverend Farrison had turned away earlier, coming back to make trouble, but the knocking was soft, almost diffident, and through the stained-glass panels she could see it was snowing hard.

She switched the cough drops to her left hand, opened the door a little, and looked out. There were two people standing on the porch, one in front of the other. It was too dark to do more than make out their outlines, and at first glance it looked like two women, but then the one in front said in a young man's voice, "*Erkas.*"

"I'm sorry," Sharon said. "I don't speak Spanish. Are you looking for a place to stay?" The snow was turning to sleet, and the wind was picking up.

"*Kumrah,*" the young man said, making a sound like he was clearing his throat, and then a whole string of words she didn't recognize.

"Just a minute," she said, and shut the door. She went back in the office, felt for the phone, and, squinting at the buttons in the near-darkness, punched in the shelter number.

It was busy. She held down the receiver, waited a minute, and tried again. Still busy. She went back to the door, hoping they'd given up and gone away.

"*Erkas,*" the man said as soon as she opened it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm trying to call the homeless shelter," and he began talking rapidly, excitedly.

He stepped forward and put his hand on the door. He had a blanket draped over him, which was why she'd mistaken him for a woman. "*Erkas,*" he said, and he sounded upset, desperate, and yet somehow still diffident, timid.

"*Bott lom,*" he said, gesturing toward the woman who was standing back almost to the edge of the porch, but Sharon wasn't looking at her. She was looking at their feet.

They were wearing sandals. At first she thought they were barefoot and she squinted through the darkness, horrified. Barefoot in the snow! Then she glimpsed the dark line of a strap, but they still might as well be. And it was snowing hard.

She couldn't leave them outside, but she didn't dare bring them into the hall to wait for the van either, not with Reverend Farrison around.

The office was out—the phone might ring—and she couldn't put them in the fellowship hall with all the stuff for the homeless in there.

"Just a minute," she said, shutting the door, and went to see if Miriam was still in the adult Sunday school room. It was dark, so she obviously wasn't, but there was a lamp on the table by the door. She switched it on. No, this wouldn't work either, not with the Communion silver in a display case against the wall, and anyway, there was a stack of paper cups on the table, and the plates of Christmas cookies Miriam had been carrying, which meant there'd be refreshments in here after the pageant. She switched off the light, and went out into the hall.

Not Reverend Wall's office—it was locked anyway—and certainly not Reverend Farrison's, and if she took them downstairs to one of the Sunday school rooms, she'd just have to sneak them back up again.

The furnace room? It was between the adult Sunday school room and the fellowship hall. She tried the door. It opened, and she looked in. The

furnace filled practically the whole room, and what it didn't was taken up by a stack of folding chairs. There wasn't a light switch she could find, but the pilot light gave off enough light to maneuver by. And it was warmer than the porch.

She went back to the door, looked down the hall to make sure nobody was coming, and let them in. "You can wait in here," she said, even though it was obvious they couldn't understand her.

They followed her through the dark hall to the furnace room, and she opened out two of the folding chairs so they could sit down, and motioned them in.

"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" ground to a halt, and Rose's voice came drifting out of the sanctuary. "Shepherd's crooks are not weapons. All right. Angel?"

"I'll call the shelter," Sharon said hastily, and shut the door on them.

She crossed to the office and tried the shelter again. "Please, please answer," she said, and when they did, she was so surprised, she forgot to tell them the couple would be inside.

"It'll be at least half an hour," the man said.

"Half an hour?"

"It's like this whenever it gets below zero," the man said. "We'll try to make it sooner."

At least she'd done the right thing—they couldn't possibly stand out in that snow for half an hour. "As you have done this to the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me," she thought ruefully. But at least it was warm in the furnace room, and out of the snow. And they were safe in there, as long as nobody came out to see what had happened to her.

"Dee," she said suddenly. She was supposed to have come out to get her a cough drop.

They were lying on the desk where she'd laid them while she phoned. She snatched them up and took off down the hall and into the sanctuary.

The angel was on the chancel steps, exhorting the shepherds not to be afraid. Sharon threaded her way through them up to the chancel and sat down between Dee and Virginia.

She handed the cough drops to Dee, who said, "What took you so long?"

"I had to make a phone call. What did I miss?"

"Not a thing. We're still on the shepherds. One of the palm trees fell over and had to be fixed, and then Reverend Farrison stopped the rehearsal to tell everybody not to let homeless people in the church, that Holy Trinity had had its sanctuary vandalized."

"Oh," she said. She gazed out over the sanctuary, looking for Reverend Farrison.

"All right, now, after the angel makes her speech," Rose said, "she's joined by a multitude of angels. That's *you*, junior choir. No. Line up on the steps. Organ?"

The organ struck up, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," and the junior choir began singing in piping, nearly inaudible voices.

Sharon couldn't see Reverend Farrison anywhere. "Do you know where Reverend Farrison went?" she whispered to Dee.

"She went out just as you came in. She had to get something from the office."

The office. What if she heard them in the furnace room and opened the door and found them in there? She half stood.

"Choir," Rose said, glaring directly at Sharon. "Will you help the junior choir by humming along with them?"

Sharon sat back down, and after a minute Reverend Farrison came in the back, carrying a pair of scissors.

" 'Late in time, behold him come,' " the junior choir sang, and Miriam stood up and went out.

"Where's Miriam going?" Sharon whispered.

"How would I know?" Dee said, looking curiously at her. "To get the refreshments ready, probably. Is something the matter?"

"No," she said.

Rose was glaring at her again. She hummed, " 'Light and life to all he brings,' " willing the song to be over so she could go out, but as soon as it was over, Rose said, "All right, wise men," and a sixth-grader carrying a jewelry box started down the center aisle. "Choir, 'We Three Kings.' Organ?"

There were four long verses to "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Sharon couldn't wait.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said. She set her folder on her chair and ducked down the stairs behind the chancel and through the narrow room that led to the side aisle. The choir called it the flower room because that was where they stored the out-of-season altar arrangements. They used it for sneaking out when they needed to leave church early, but right now there was barely room to squeeze through. The floor was covered with music stands and pots of silk Easter lilies, and a huge spray of red roses stood in front of the door to the sanctuary.

Sharon shoved it into the corner, stepping gingerly among the lilies, and opened the door.

"Balthazar, lay the gold in front of the manger, don't drop it." Rose said. "Mary, you're the Mother of God. Try not to look so scared."

Sharon hurried down the side aisle and out into the hall, where the other two kings were waiting, holding perfume bottles.

" 'Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect sight,' " the choir sang.

The hall and office lights were still off, but light was spilling out of the adult Sunday school room all the way to the end of the hall. Sharon could see the furnace room door was still shut.

I'll call the shelter again, she thought, and see if I can hurry them up, and if I can't, I'll take them downstairs till everybody's gone, and then take them to the shelter myself.

She tiptoed past the open door of the adult Sunday school room so

Miriam wouldn't see her, and then half-sprinted down to the office and opened the door.

"Hi," Miriam said, looking up from the desk. She had an aluminum pitcher in one hand and was rummaging in the top drawer with the other. "Do you know where the secretary keeps the key to the kitchen? It's locked, and I can't get in."

"No," Sharon said, her heart still thumping.

"I need a spoon to stir the Kool-Aid," Miriam said, opening and shutting the side drawers of the desk. "She must have taken them home with her. I don't blame her. First Baptist had theirs stolen last month. They had to change all the locks."

Sharon glanced uneasily at the furnace room door.

"Oh, well," Miriam said, opening the top drawer again. "I'll have to make do with this." She pulled out a plastic ruler. "The kids won't care."

She started out and then stopped. "They're not done in there yet, are they?"

"No," Sharon said. "They're still on the wise men. I needed to call my husband to tell him to take the turkey out of the freezer."

"I've got to do that when I get home," Miriam said. She went across the hall and into the library, leaving the door open. Sharon waited a minute and then called the shelter. It was busy. She held her watch to the light from the hall. They'd said half an hour. By that time the rehearsal would be over and the hall would be full of people.

Less than half an hour. They were already singing "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume." All that was left was "Silent Night" and then "Joy to the World," and the angels would come streaming out for cookies and Kool-Aid.

She went over to the front door and peered out. Below zero, the man at the shelter said, and it had really started to snow, slanting sharply across the parking lot.

She couldn't send them out in that without any shoes. And she couldn't keep them up here, not with the kids right next door. She was going to have to move them downstairs.

But where? Not the choir room. The choir would be taking their folders and robes back down there, and the pageant kids would be getting their coats out of the Sunday school rooms. And the kitchen was locked.

The nursery? That might work. It was at the other end of the hall from the choir room, but she would have to take them past the adult Sunday school room to the stairs, and the door was open.

" 'Si-i-lent night, ho-oh-ly night,' " came drifting out of the sanctuary, and then was cut off, and she could hear Reverend Farrison's voice, lecturing probably about the dangers of letting the homeless in the church.

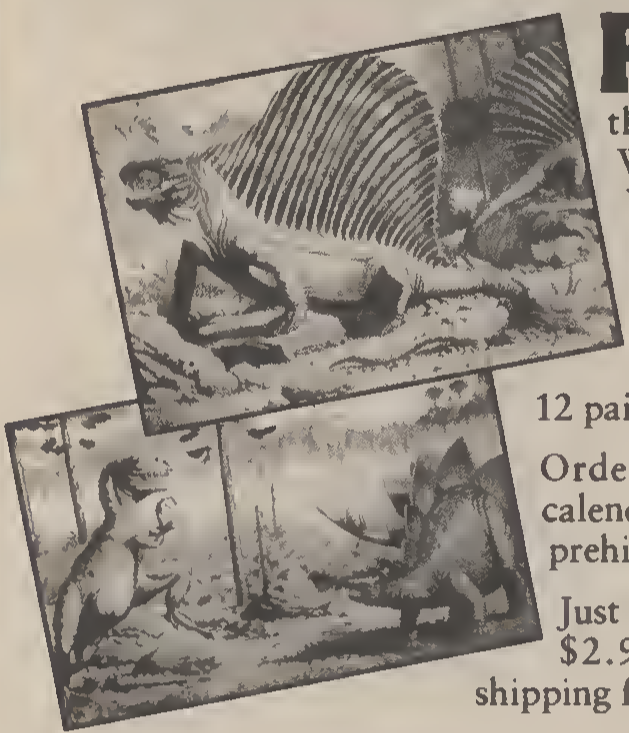
She glanced again at the furnace room door and then went into the adult Sunday school room. Miriam was setting out the paper cups on the table. She looked up. "Did you get through to your husband?"

"Yes," Sharon said. Miriam looked expectant.

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"Can I have a cookie?" Sharon said at random.

"Take one of the stars. The kids like the Santas and the Christmas trees the best."

She grabbed up a bright yellow-frosted star. "Thanks," she said, and went out, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Leave it open," Miriam said. "I want to be able to hear when they're done."

Sharon opened the door back up half as far as she'd shut it, afraid any less would bring Miriam to the door to open it herself, and walked quietly to the furnace room.

The choir was on the last verse of "Silent Night." After that there was only "Joy to the World" and then the benediction. Open door or no open door, she was going to have to move them now. She opened the furnace room door.

They were standing where she had left them, between the folding chairs, and she knew, without any proof, that they had stood there like that the whole time she had been gone.

The young man was standing slightly in front of the woman, the way he had at the door, only he wasn't a man, he was a boy, his beard as thin and wispy as an adolescent's, and the woman was even younger, a child of ten maybe, only she had to be older because now that there was light from the half-open door of the adult Sunday school room Sharon could see that she was pregnant.

She regarded all this—the girl's awkward bulkiness and the boy's beard, the fact that they had not sat down, the fact that it was the light from the adult Sunday school room that was making her see now what she hadn't before—with some part of her mind that was still functioning, that was still thinking how long the van from the shelter would take, how to get them past Reverend Farrison, some part of her mind that was taking in the details that proved what she had already known the moment she opened the door.

"What are you *doing* here?" she whispered, and the boy opened his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "*Erkas,*" he said.

And that still-functioning part of her mind put her finger to her lips in a gesture he obviously understood because they both looked instantly frightened. "You have to come with me," she whispered.

But then it stopped functioning altogether, and she was half-running them past the open door and onto the stairs, not even hearing the organ blaring out, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," whispering, "Hurry! Hurry!" and they didn't know how to get down the steps, the girl turned around and came down backward, her hands flat on the steps above, and the boy helped her down, step by step, as if they were clambering down rocks, and she tried to pull the girl along faster and nearly made her stumble, and even that didn't bring her to her senses.

She hissed, "Like this," and showed them how to walk down the steps, facing forward, one hand on the rail, and they paid no attention, they came down backward like toddlers, and it took forever, the hymn she

wasn't hearing was already at the end of the third verse and they were only halfway down, all of them panting hard, and Sharon scurrying back up above them as if that would hurry them, past wondering how she would ever get them up the stairs again, past thinking she would have to call the van and tell them not to come, thinking only, Hurry, hurry, and, How did they *get* here?

She did not come to herself until she had herded them somehow down the downstairs hall and into the nursery, thinking, It can't be locked, please don't let it be locked, and it wasn't, and gotten them inside and pulled the door shut and tried to lock it, and it didn't have a lock, and she thought, "That must be why it wasn't locked," an actual coherent thought, her first one since that moment when she opened the furnace room door, and seemed to come to herself.

She stared at them, breathing hard, and it *was* them, their never having seen stairs before was proof of that, if she needed any proof, but she didn't, she had known it the instant she saw them, there was no question.

She wondered if this were some sort of vision, the kind people were always getting where they saw Jesus's face on a refrigerator or the Virgin Mary dressed in blue and white, surrounded by roses. But their rough brown cloaks were dripping melted snow on the nursery carpet, their feet in the useless sandals were bright red with cold, they looked too frightened.

And they didn't look at all like they did in religious pictures. They were too short, his hair was greasy and his face was tough-looking, like a young punk's, and her veil looked like a grubby dishtowel and it didn't hang loose, it was tied around her neck and knotted in the back, and they were too young, almost as young as the children upstairs dressed like them.

They were looking around the room frightenedly, at the white crib and the rocking chair and the light fixture overhead. The boy fumbled in his sash and brought out a leather sack. He held it out to Sharon.

"How did you *get* here?" she said wonderingly. "You're supposed to be on your way to Bethlehem."

He thrust the bag at her, and when she didn't take it, untied the leather string and took out a crude-looking coin and held it out.

"You don't have to pay me," she said, which was ridiculous. He couldn't understand her. She held a flat hand up, pushing the coin away and shaking her head. That was a universal sign, wasn't it? And what was the sign for welcome? She spread her arms out, smiling at them. "You are welcome to stay here," she said, trying to put the meaning of the words into her voice. "Sit down. Rest."

They remained standing. Sharon pulled the rocking chair forward. "Sit, please."

Mary looked frightened, and Sharon put her hands on the arms and sat down to show her how. Joseph immediately knelt, and Mary tried awkwardly to.

"No, no!" Sharon said, and stood up so fast she set the rocking chair swinging. "Don't kneel. I'm nobody." She looked hopelessly at them. "How did you *get* here? You're not supposed to be here."

Joseph stood up. "*Erkas,*" he said, and went over to the bulletin board.

It was covered with colored pictures from Jesus's life: Jesus healing the lame boy, Jesus in the temple, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He pointed to the picture of the Nativity scene. "*Kumrah,*" he said.

Does he recognize himself? she wondered, but he was pointing at the donkey standing by the manger. "*Erkas,*" he said. "*Erkas.*"

Did that mean "donkey," or something else? Was he demanding to know what she had done with theirs, or trying to ask her if she had one? In all the pictures, all the versions of the story, Mary was riding a donkey, but she had thought they'd gotten that part of the story wrong, as they had gotten everything else wrong, their faces, their clothes, and above all their youth, their helplessness.

"*Kumrah erkas,*" he said, "*Kumrah erkas. Bott lom?*"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know where Bethlehem is."

Or what to do with you, she thought. Her first instinct was to hide them here until the rehearsal was over, and everybody had gone home. She couldn't let Reverend Farrison find them.

But surely as soon as she saw who they were, she would—what? Fall to her knees? Or call for the shelter's van? "That's the second couple tonight," she'd said when she shut the door. Sharon wondered suddenly if it was them she'd turned away, if they'd wandered around the parking lot, lost and frightened, and then knocked on the door again.

She couldn't let Reverend Farrison find them, but there was no reason for her to come into the nursery. All the children were upstairs, and the refreshments were in the adult Sunday school room. But what if she checked the rooms before she locked up?

I'll take them home with me, Sharon thought. They'll be safe there. If she could get them up the stairs and out of the parking lot before the rehearsal ended.

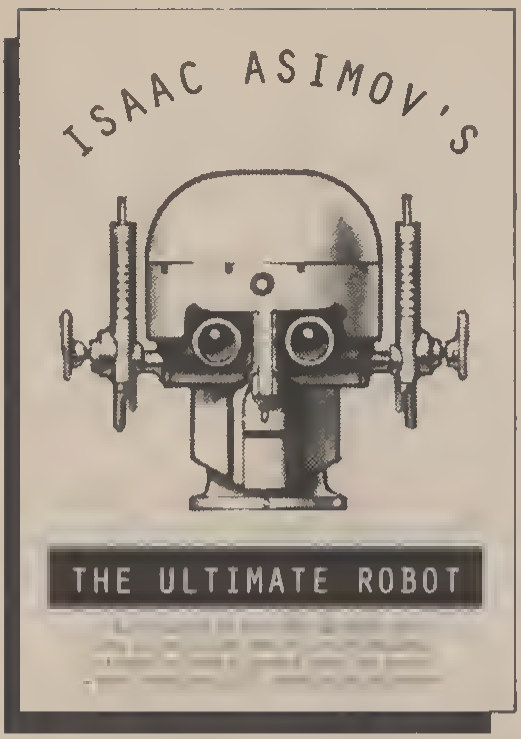
I got them down here without anybody seeing them, she thought. But even if she could manage it, which she doubted, if they didn't die of fright when she started the car and the seat belts closed down over them, home was no better than the shelter.

They had gotten lost through some accident of time and space, and ended up at the church. The way back—if there was a way back, there had to be a way back, they had to be at Bethlehem by tomorrow night—was here.

It occurred to her suddenly that maybe she shouldn't have let them in, that the way back was outside the north door. But I couldn't *not* let them in, she protested, it was snowing, and they didn't have any shoes.

But maybe if she'd turned them away, they would have walked off the porch and back into their own time. Maybe they still could.

She said, "Stay here," putting her hand up to show them what she



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meant, and went out of the nursery into the hall, shutting the door tightly behind her.

The choir was still singing "Joy to the World." They must have had to stop again. Sharon ran silently up the stairs and past the adult Sunday school room. Its door was still half-open, and she could see the plates of cookies on the table. She opened the north door, hesitating a moment as if she expected to see sand and camels, and leaned out. It was still sleeting, and the cars had an inch of snow on them.

She looked around for something to wedge the door open with, pushed one of the potted palms into it, and went out on the porch. It was slick, and she had to take hold of the wall to keep her footing. She stepped carefully to the edge of the porch and peered into the sleet, already shivering, looking for what? A lessening of the sleet, a spot where the darkness was darker, or not as dark? A light?

Nothing. After a minute she stepped off the porch, moving as cautiously as Mary and Joseph had going down the stairs, and made a circuit of the parking lot.

Nothing. If the way back had been out here, it wasn't now, and she was going to freeze if she stayed out here. She went back inside, and then stood there, staring at the door, trying to think what to do. I've got to get help, she thought, hugging her arms to herself for warmth. I've got to tell somebody. She started down the hall to the sanctuary.

The organ had stopped. "Mary and Joseph, I need to talk to you for a minute," Rose's voice said. "Shepherds, leave your crooks on the front pew. The rest of you, there are refreshments in the adult Sunday school room. Choir, don't leave. I need to go over some things with you."

There was a clatter of sticks and then a stampede, and Sharon was overwhelmed by shepherds elbowing their way to the refreshments. One of the wise men caught his Air Jordan in his robe and nearly fell down, and two of the angels lost their tinsel halos in their eagerness to reach the cookies.

Sharon fought through them and into the back of the sanctuary. Rose was in the side aisle, showing Mary and Joseph how to walk, and the choir was gathering up their music. Sharon couldn't see Dee.

Virginia came down the center aisle, stripping off her robe as she walked. Sharon went to meet her. "Do you know where Dee is?" she asked her.

"She went home," Virginia said, handing Sharon a folder. "You left this on your chair. Dee's voice was giving out completely, and I said, 'This is silly. Go home and go to bed.' "

"Virginia . . ." Sharon said.

"Can you put my robe away for me?" she said, pulling her stole off over her head. "I've got exactly ten minutes to get to the mall."

Sharon nodded absently, and Virginia draped it over her arm and hurried out. Sharon scanned the choir, wondering who else she could tell.

Rose dismissed Mary and Joseph, who went off at a run, and crossed

to the center aisle. "Rehearsal tomorrow night at six-fifteen," she said. "I need you in your robes and up here right on time, because I've got to practice with the brass quartet at six-forty. Any questions?"

Yes, Sharon thought, looking around the sanctuary. Who can I get to help me?

"What are we singing for the processional?" one of the tenors asked.

" '*Adeste Fideles,*' " Rose said. "Before you leave, let's line up so you can see who your partner is."

Reverend Wall was sitting in one of the back pews, looking at the notes to his sermon. Sharon sidled along the pew and sat down next to him.

"Reverend Wall," she said, and then had no idea how to start. "Do you know what *erkas* means? I think it's Hebrew."

He raised his head from his notes and peered at her. "It's Aramaic. It means 'lost.' "

"Lost." He'd been trying to tell her at the door, in the furnace room, downstairs. "We're lost."

"Forgotten," Reverend Wall said. "Misplaced."

Misplaced, all right. By two thousand years, an ocean, and how many miles?

"When Mary and Joseph journeyed up to Bethlehem from Nazareth, how did they go?" she asked, hoping he would say, "Why are you asking all these questions?" so she could tell him, but he said, "Ah. You weren't listening to my sermon. We know nothing of that journey, only that they arrived in Bethlehem."

Not at this rate, she thought.

"Pass in the anthem," Rose said from the chancel. "I've only got thirty copies, and I don't want to come up short tomorrow night."

Sharon looked up. The choir was leaving. "On this journey, was there anywhere where they might have gotten lost?" she said hurriedly.

" '*Erkas*' can also mean 'hidden, passed out of sight,' " he said. "Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew. In Hebrew, the word—"

"Reverend Wall," Reverend Farrison said from the center aisle. "I need to talk to you about the benediction."

"Ah. Do you want me to give it now?" he said, and stood up, clutching his papers.

Sharon took the opportunity to grab her folder and duck out. She ran downstairs after the choir.

There was no reason for any of the choir to go in the nursery, but she stationed herself in the hall, sorting through the music in her folder as if she was putting it in order, and trying to think what to do.

Maybe, if everyone went in the choir room, she could duck in the nursery or one of the Sunday school rooms and hide until everybody was gone. But she didn't know whether Reverend Farrison checked each of the rooms before leaving. Or worse, locked them.

She could tell her she needed to stay late, to practice the anthem, but she didn't think Reverend Farrison would trust her to lock up, and she didn't want to call attention to herself, to make Reverend Farrison think,

"Where's Sharon Englert? I didn't see her leave." Maybe she could hide in the chancel, or the flower room, but that meant leaving the nursery unguarded.

She had to decide. The crowd was thinning out, the choir handing Rose their music and putting on their coats and boots. She had to do something. Reverend Farrison could come down the stairs any minute to search the nursery. But she continued to stand there, sorting blindly through her music, and Reverend Farrison came down the steps, carrying a ring of keys.

Sharon stepped back protectively, the way Joseph had, but Reverend Farrison didn't even see her. She went up to Rose and said, "Can you lock up for me? I've got to be at Emmanuel Lutheran at nine-thirty to collect their 'Least of These' contributions."

"I was supposed to go meet with the brass quartet—" Rose said reluctantly.

Don't let Rose talk you out of it, Sharon thought.

"Be sure to lock *all* the doors, including the fellowship hall," Reverend Farrison said, handing her the keys.

"No, I've got mine," Rose said. "But—"

"And check the parking lot. There were some homeless hanging around earlier. Thanks."

She ran upstairs, and Sharon immediately went over to see Rose. "Rose," she said.

She held out her hand for Sharon's anthem.

Sharon shuffled through her music and handed it over to her. "I was wondering," she said, trying to keep her voice casual, "I need to stay and practice the music for tomorrow. I'd be glad to lock up for you. I could drop the keys by your house tomorrow morning."

"Oh, you're a godsend," Rose said. She handed Sharon the stack of music and got her keys out of her purse. "These are the keys to the outside doors, north door, east door, fellowship hall," she said, ticking them off so fast Sharon couldn't see which was which, but it didn't matter. She could figure them out after everybody left.

"This is the choir room door," Rose said. She handed them to Sharon. "I *really* appreciate this. The brass quartet couldn't come to the rehearsal, they had a concert tonight, and I really need to go over the introit with them. They're having a terrible time with the middle part."

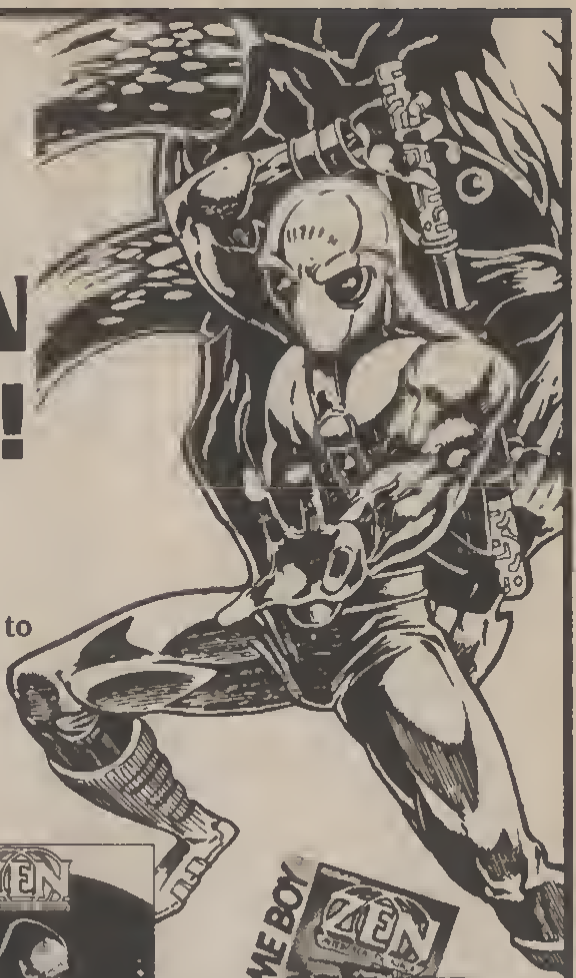
So am I, Sharon thought.

Rose yanked on her coat. "And after I meet with them, I've got to go over to Miriam Berg's and pick up the baby Jesus." She stopped, her arm half in her coat sleeve. "Did you need me to stay and go over the music with you?"

"No!" she said, alarmed. "No, I'll be fine. I just need to run through it a couple of times."

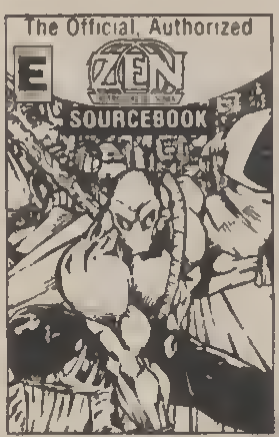
"Okay. Great. Thanks again," she said, patting her pockets for her keys. She took the keyring away from Sharon and unhooked her car

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keys. "You're a godsend, I mean it," she said, and took off up the stairs at a trot.

Two of the altos came out, pulling on their gloves. "Do you know what I've got to face when I get home?" Julia said. "Putting up the tree."

They handed their music to Sharon.

"I hate Christmas," Karen said. "By the time it's over, I'm worn to a frazzle."

They hurried up the stairs, still talking, and Sharon leaned in to the choir room to make sure it was empty, dumped the music and Virginia's robe on a chair, took off her robe, and went upstairs.

Miriam was coming out of the adult Sunday school room, carrying a pitcher of Kool-Aid. "Come on, Elizabeth," she called into the room. "We've got to get to Buymore before it closes. She managed to completely destroy her halo," she said to Sharon, "so now I've got to go buy some more tinsel. Elizabeth, we're the last ones *here*."

Elizabeth strolled out, holding a Christmas tree cookie in her mittened hand. She stopped halfway to the door to lick the cookie's frosting.

"Elizabeth," Miriam said. "Come o*n*."

Sharon held the door for them, and Miriam went out, ducking her head against the driving snow. Elizabeth dawdled after her, looking up at the sky.

Miriam waved. "See you tomorrow night."

"I'll be here," Sharon said, and shut the door. I'll *still* be here, she thought. And what if they are? What happens then? Does the Christmas pageant disappear, and all the rest of it? The cookies and the shopping and the Senior Prom Barbies? And the church?

She watched Miriam and Elizabeth through the stained glass panel till she saw the car's taillights, purple through the blue glass, pull out of the parking lot, and then tried the keys one after the other, till she found the right one, and locked it.

She checked quickly in the sanctuary and the bathrooms, in case somebody was still there, and then ran down the stairs to the nursery to make sure *they* were still there, that they hadn't disappeared.

They were there, sitting on the floor next to the rocking chair and sharing what looked like dried dates from an unfolded cloth. Joseph started to stand up as soon as he saw her poke her head in the door, but she motioned him back down. "Stay here," she said softly, and realized she didn't need to whisper. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm just going to lock the doors."

She pulled the door shut, and went back upstairs. It hadn't occurred to her they'd be hungry, and she had no idea what they were used to eating—unleavened bread? Lamb? Whatever it was, there probably wasn't any in the kitchen, but the deacons had had an Advent supper last week. With luck, there might be some chili in the refrigerator. Or, better yet, some crackers.

The kitchen was locked. She'd forgotten Miriam had said that, and anyway, one of the keys must open it. It didn't, and after she'd tried all

of them twice she remembered they were Rose's keys, not Reverend Farrison's, and turned the lights on to the fellowship hall. There was tons of food in there, stacked on tables alongside the blankets and used clothes and toys. And all of it was in cans, just the way Reverend Farrison had specified in the bulletin.

Miriam had taken the Kool-Aid home, but Sharon hadn't seen her carrying any cookies. The kids probably ate them all, she thought, but she went into the adult Sunday school room and looked. There was a half a paper plate left, and Miriam had been right—the kids liked the Christmas trees and Santas the best—the only ones left were yellow stars. There was a stack of paper cups, too. She picked them both up and took them downstairs.

"I brought you some food," she said, and set the plate on the floor between them.

They were staring in alarm at her, and Joseph was scrambling to his feet.

"It's food," she said, bringing her hand to her mouth and pretending to chew. "Cakes."

Joseph was pulling on Mary's arm, trying to yank her up, and they were both staring, horrified, at her jeans and sweatshirt. She realized suddenly they must not recognize her without her choir robe. Worse, that the robe looked at least a little like their clothes, but this getup must look totally alien.

"I'll bring you something to drink," she said hastily, showing them the paper cups, and went out. She ran down to the choir room. Her robe was still draped over the chair where she'd dumped it, along with Virginia's and the music. She put the robe on and then filled the paper cups at the water fountain and carried them back to the nursery.

They were standing, but when they saw her in the robe, they sat back down. She handed Mary one of the paper cups, but she only looked at her fearfully. Sharon held it out to Joseph. He took it, too firmly, and it crumpled, water spurting onto the carpet.

"That's okay, it doesn't matter," Sharon said, cursing herself for an idiot. "I'll get you a real cup."

She ran upstairs, trying to think where there would be one. The coffee cups were in the kitchen, and so were the glasses, and she hadn't seen anything in the fellowship hall or the adult Sunday school room.

She smiled suddenly. "I'll get you a real cup," she said, and went in the adult Sunday school room and took the silver Communion chalice out of the display case. There were silver plates, too. She wished she'd thought of it sooner.

She went in the fellowship hall and got a blanket and took the things downstairs. She filled the chalice with water and took it to them, and handed Mary the chalice, and this time Mary took it without hesitation and drank deeply from it.

Sharon gave Joseph the blanket. "I'll leave you alone so you can eat

and rest," she said, and went out in the hall, pulling the door nearly shut again.

She went down to the choir room and hung up Virginia's robe and stacked the music neatly on the table. Then she went up to the furnace room and folded up the folding chairs and stacked them against the wall. She checked the east door and the one in the fellowship hall. They were both locked.

She turned off the lights in the fellowship hall and the office, and then thought, "I should call the shelter," and turned them back on. It had been almost an hour. They had probably already come and not found anyone, but in case they were running really late, she'd better call.

The line was busy. She tried it twice and then called home. Bill's parents were there. "I'm going to be late," she told him. "The rehearsal's running long," and hung up, wondering how many lies she'd told so far tonight.

Well, it went with the territory, didn't it? Joseph lying about the baby being his, and the wise men sneaking out the back way, the Holy Family hiding and then hightailing it to Egypt and the innkeeper lying to Herod's soldiers about where they'd gone.

And in the meantime, more hiding. She went back downstairs and opened the door gently, trying not to startle them, and then just stood there, watching.

They had eaten the cookies. The empty paper plate stood on the floor next to the chalice, not a crumb on it. Mary lay curled up like the child she was, under the blanket, and Joseph sat with his back to the rocking chair, guarding her.

Poor things, she thought, leaning her cheek against the door. Poor things. So young, and so far away from home. She wondered what they made of it all? Did they think they had wandered into a palace in some strange kingdom? There's stranger yet to come, she thought, shepherds and angels and old men from the east, bearing jewelry boxes and perfume bottles. And then Cana. And Jerusalem. And Golgotha.

But for the moment, a place to sleep, in out of the weather, and something to eat, and a few minutes of peace. How still we see thee lie. She stood there a long time, her cheek resting against the door, watching Mary sleep and Joseph trying to stay awake.

His head nodded forward, and he jerked it back, waking himself up, and saw Sharon. He stood up immediately, careful not to disturb Mary, and came over to her, looking worried. "*Erkas kumrah,*" he said. "*Bott lom?*"

"I'll go find it," she said.

She went upstairs and turned the lights on again and went in the fellowship hall. The way back wasn't out the north door, but maybe they had knocked at one of the other doors first and then come around to it when no one answered. The fellowship hall door was on the northwest corner. She unlocked it, trying key after key, and opened it. The sleet

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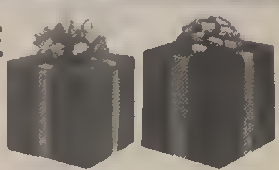
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was slashing down harder than ever. It had already covered up the tire tracks in the parking lot.

She shut the door and tried the east door, which nobody used except for the Sunday service, and then the north door again. Nothing. Sleet and wind and icy air.

Now what? They had been on their way to Bethlehem from Nazareth, and somewhere along the way they had taken a wrong turn. But how? And where? She didn't even know what direction they'd been heading in. Up. Joseph had gone *up* from Nazareth, which meant north, and in "The First Nowell," it said the star was in the northwest.

She needed a map. The ministers' offices were locked, but there were books on the bottom shelf of the display case in the adult Sunday school room. Maybe one was an atlas.

It wasn't. They were all self-help books, about coping with grief and codependency and teenage pregnancy, except for an ancient-looking concordance, and a Bible dictionary.

The Bible dictionary had a set of maps at the back. Early Israelite Settlements in Canaan, The Assyrian Empire, The Wanderings of the Israelites in the Wilderness. She flipped forward. The Journeys of Paul. She turned back a page. Palestine in New Testament Times.

She found Jerusalem easily, and Bethlehem should be northwest of it. There was Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph had started from, so Bethlehem had to be further north.

It wasn't there. She traced her finger over the towns, reading the tiny print. Cana, Kedesh, Jericho, but no Bethlehem. Which was ridiculous. It had to be there. She started down from the north, marking each of the towns with her finger.

When she finally found it, it wasn't at all where it was supposed to be. Like them, she thought. It was south and a little west of Jerusalem, so close it couldn't be more than a few miles from the city.

She looked down at the bottom of the page for the map scale, and there was an insert labeled, "Mary and Joseph's Journey to Bethlehem," with their route marked in broken red.

Nazareth was almost straight north of Bethlehem, but they had gone east to the Jordan River, and then south along its banks. At Jericho they'd turned back west toward Jerusalem through an empty brown space marked Judean Desert.

She wondered if that was where they had gotten lost, the donkey wandering off to find water and them going after it and losing the path. If it was, then the way back lay southwest, but the church didn't have any doors that opened in that direction, and even if it did, they would open on twentieth-century parking lot and snow, not on first-century Palestine.

How had they gotten here? There was nothing in the map to tell her what might have happened on their journey to cause this.

She put the dictionary back and pulled out the concordance.

There was a sound. A key, and somebody opening the door. She slapped

the book shut, shoved it back into the bookcase, and went out into the hall. Reverend Farrison was standing at the door, looking scared. "Oh, Sharon," she said, putting her hand to her chest. "What are you still doing here? You scared me half to death."

That makes two of us, Sharon thought, her heart thumping. "I had to stay and practice," she said. "I told Rose I'd lock up. What are you doing here?"

"I got a call from the shelter," she said, opening the office door. "They got a call from us to pick up a homeless couple, but when they got here there was nobody outside."

She went in the office and looked behind the desk, in the corner next to the filing cabinets. "I was worried they got into the church," she said, coming out. "The last thing we need is someone vandalizing the church two days before Christmas." She shut the office door behind her. "Did you check all the doors?"

Yes, she thought, and none of them led anywhere. "Yes," she said. "They were all locked. And anyway, I would have heard anybody trying to get in. I heard you."

Reverend Farrison opened the door to the furnace room. "They could have sneaked in and hidden when everyone was leaving." She looked in at the stacked folding chairs and then shut the door. She started down the hall toward the stairs.

"I checked the whole church," Sharon said, following her.

Reverend Farrison stopped at the stairs, looking speculatively down the steps.

"I was nervous about being alone," Sharon said desperately, "so I turned on all the lights and checked all the Sunday school rooms and the choir room and the bathrooms. There isn't anybody here."

Reverend Farrison looked up from the stairs and toward the end of the hall. "What about the sanctuary?"

"The sanctuary?" Sharon said blankly.

She had already started down the hall toward it, and Sharon followed her, relieved and then, suddenly, hopeful. Maybe there was a door she'd missed. A sanctuary door that faced southwest. "Is there a door in the sanctuary?"

Reverend Farrison looked irritated. "If someone went out the east door, they could have gotten in and hidden in the sanctuary. Did you check the pews?" She went in the sanctuary. "We've had a lot of trouble lately with homeless people sleeping in the pews. You take that side, and I'll take this one," she said, going over to the side aisle. She started along the rows of padded pews, bending down to look under each one. "Our Lady of Sorrows had their Communion silver stolen right off the altar."

The Communion silver, Sharon thought, working her way along the rows. She'd forgotten about the chalice.

Reverend Farrison had reached the front. She opened the flower room door, glanced in, closed it, and went up into the chancel. "Did you check

the adult Sunday school room?" she said, bending down to look under the chairs.

"Nobody could have hidden in there. The junior choir was in there, having refreshments," Sharon said, and knew it wouldn't do any good. Reverend Farrison was going to insist on checking it anyway, and once she'd found the display case open, the chalice missing, she would go through all the other rooms, one after the other. Till she came to the nursery.

"Do you think it's a good idea us doing this?" Sharon said. "I mean, if there is somebody in the church, they might be dangerous. I think we should wait. I'll call my husband, and when he gets here, the three of us can check—"

"I called the police," Reverend Farrison said, coming down the steps from the chancel and down the center aisle. "They'll be here any minute."

The police. And there they were, hiding in the nursery, a bearded punk and a pregnant teenager, caught redhanded with the Communion silver.

Reverend Farrison started out into the hall.

"I didn't check the fellowship hall," Sharon said rapidly. "I mean, I checked the door, but I didn't turn on the lights, and with all those presents for the homeless in there. . . ."

She led Reverend Farrison down the hall, past the stairs. "They could have gotten in the north door during the rehearsal and hidden under one of the tables."

Reverend Farrison stopped at the bank of lights and began flicking them. The sanctuary lights went off, and the light over the stairs came on.

Third from the top, Sharon thought, watching Reverend Farrison hit the switch. Please. Don't let the adult Sunday school room come on.

The office lights came on, and the hall light went out. "This church's top priority after Christmas is labeling these lights," Reverend Farrison said, and the fellowship hall light came on.

Sharon followed her right to the door and then, as Reverend Farrison went in, said, "You check in here. I'll check the adult Sunday school room," and shut the door on her.

She went to the adult Sunday school room door, opened it, waited a full minute, and then shut it silently. She crept down the hall to the light bank, switched the stairs light off and shot down the darkened stairs, along the hall, and into the nursery.

They were already scrambling to their feet. Mary had put her hand on the seat of the rocking chair to pull herself up and set it rocking, but she didn't let go of it.

"Come with me," Sharon whispered, grabbing up the chalice. It was half-full of water, and Sharon looked around hurriedly, and then poured it out on the carpet and tucked it under her arm.

"Hurry!" Sharon whispered, opening the door, and there was no need to motion them forward, to put her fingers to her lips. They followed her

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swiftly, silently down the hall, Mary's head ducked, and Joseph's arms held at his sides, ready to come up defensively, ready to protect her.

Sharon walked to the stairs, dreading the thought of trying to get them up them. She thought for a moment of putting them in the choir room and locking them in. She had the key, and she could tell Reverend Farrison she'd checked it and then locked it to make sure no one got in. But if it didn't work, they'd be trapped with no way out. She had to get them upstairs.

She halted at the foot of the stairs, looking up around the landing and listening. "We have to hurry," she said, taking hold of the railing to show them how to climb, and started up the stairs.

This time they did much better, still putting their hands on the steps in front of them instead of the rail, but climbing up quickly. Three-fourths of the way up Joseph even took hold of the rail.

Sharon did better, too, her mind steadily now on how to escape Reverend Farrison, what to say to the police, where to take them.

Not the furnace room, even though Reverend Farrison had already looked in there. It was too close to the door, and the police would start with the hall. And not the sanctuary. It was too open.

She stopped just below the top of the stairs, motioning them to keep down, and they instantly pressed themselves back into the shadows. Why was it those signals were universal—danger, silence, run? Because it's a dangerous world, she thought, then and now, and there's worse to come. Herod, and the flight into Egypt. And Judas. And the police.

She crept to the top of the stairs and looked toward the sanctuary and then the door. Reverend Farrison must still be in the fellowship hall. She wasn't in the hall, and if she'd gone in the adult Sunday school room, she'd have seen the missing chalice and sent up a hue and cry.

She bit her lip, wondering if there was time to put it back, if she dared leave them here on the stairs while she sneaked in and put it in the display case, but it was too late. The police were here. She could see their red and blue lights flashing purply through the stained glass door panels. In another minute they'd be at the door, knocking, and Reverend Farrison would come out of the fellowship hall, and there'd be no time for anything.

She'd have to hide them in the sanctuary until Reverend Farrison took the police downstairs, and then move them—where? The furnace room? It was still too close to the door. The fellowship hall?

She waved them upward, like John Wayne in one of his war movies, along the hall and into the sanctuary. Reverend Farrison had turned off the lights, but there was still enough light from the chancel cross to see by. She dumped the chalice in the back pew and led them along the back row to the shadowed side aisle, and then pushed them ahead of her to the front, listening intently for the sound of knocking.

Joseph went ahead with his eyes on the ground, as if he expected more stairs, but Mary had her head up, looking toward the chancel, toward the cross.

Don't look at it, Sharon thought. Don't look at it, and hurried ahead to open the flower room door.

There was a muffled sound like thunder, and the bang of a door shutting.

"In here," she whispered, and opened the flower room door.

She'd been on the other side of the sanctuary when Reverend Farrison checked the flower room. Sharon understood now why she had given it only the most cursory of glances. It had been full before. Now it was crammed with the palm trees and the manger. They'd heaped the rest of the props in it—the innkeeper's lantern and the baby blanket. She pushed the manger back, and one of its crossed legs caught on a music stand and tipped it over. She lunged for it, steadied it, and then stopped, listening.

Knocking out in the hall. And the sound of a door shutting. Voices. She let go of the music stand and pushed them into the flower room, shoving Mary into the corner against the spray of roses and nearly knocking over another music stand.

She motioned to Joseph to stand on the other side and flattened herself against a palm tree, shut the door, and realized the moment she did that it was a mistake.

They couldn't stand here in the dark like this—the slightest movement by any of them would bring everything clattering down, and Mary couldn't stay squashed uncomfortably into the corner like that for long.

She should have left the door slightly open, so there was enough light from the cross to see by, so she could hear where the police were. She couldn't hear anything with the door shut except the sound of their own light breathing and the clank of the lantern when she tried to shift her weight, and she couldn't risk opening the door again, not when they might already be in the sanctuary, looking for her. She should have shut Mary and Joseph in here and gone back into the hall to head the police off. Reverend Farrison would be looking for her, and if she didn't find her, she'd take it as one more proof that there was a dangerous homeless person in the church and insist on the police searching every nook and cranny.

Maybe she could go out through the choir loft, Sharon thought, if she could move the music stands out of the way, or at least shift things around so they could hide behind them, but she couldn't do either in the dark.

She knelt carefully, slowly, keeping her back perfectly straight, and put her hand out behind her, feeling for the top of the manger. She patted spiky straw till she found the baby blanket and pulled it out. They must have put the wise men's perfume bottles in the manger, too. They clinked wildly as she pulled the blanket out.

She knelt further, feeling for the narrow space under the door, and jammed the blanket into it. It didn't quite reach the whole length of the door, but it was the best she could do. She straightened, still slowly, and patted the wall for the light switch.

Her hand brushed it. Please, she prayed, don't let this turn on some other light, and flicked it on.

Neither of them had moved, not even to shift their hands. Mary, pressed against the roses, took a caught breath, and then released it slowly, as if she had been holding it the whole time.

They watched Sharon as she knelt again to tuck in a corner of the blanket and then turned slowly around so she was facing into the room. She reached across the manger for one of the music stands and stacked it against one behind it, working as gingerly, as slowly, as if she were defusing a bomb. She reached across the manger, lifted one of the music stands, and set it on the straw so she could push the manger back enough to give her space to move. The stand tipped, and Joseph steadied it.

Sharon picked up one of the cardboard palm trees. She worked the plywood base free, set it in the manger, and slid the palm tree flat along the wall next to Mary, and then did the other one.

That gave them some space. There was nothing Sharon could do about the rest of the music stands. Their metal frames were tangled together, and against the outside wall was a tall metal cabinet, with pots of Easter lilies in front of it. She could move the lilies to the top of the cabinet at least.

She listened carefully with her ear to the door for a minute, and then stepped carefully over the manger between two lilies. She bent and picked up one of them and set it on top of the cabinet and then stopped, frowning at the wall. She bent down again, moving her hand along the floor in a slow semi-circle.

Cold air, and it was coming from behind the cabinet. She stood on tiptoe and looked behind it. "There's a door," she whispered. "To the outside."

"Sharon!" a muffled voice called.

Mary froze, and Joseph moved so he was between her and the door. Sharon put her hand on the light switch and waited, listening.

"Mrs. Englert?" a man's voice called. Another one, farther off, "Her car's still here," and then Reverend Farrison's voice again, "Maybe she went downstairs."

Silence. Sharon put her ear against the door and listened, and then edged past Joseph to the side of the cabinet and peered behind it. The door opened outward. They wouldn't have to move the cabinet out very far, just enough for her to squeeze through to open the door, and then there'd be enough space for all of them to get through, even Mary. There were bushes on this side of the church. They could hide underneath them until after the police left.

She motioned to Joseph to help her, and together they pushed it a few inches out from the wall. It knocked one of the Easter lilies over, and Mary stooped awkwardly and picked it up, cradling it in her arms.

They pushed again. This time it made a jangling noise, as if there were coat hangers hanging inside, and Sharon thought she heard voices again,

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but there was no help for it. She squeezed into the narrow space, thinking, What if it's locked? and opened the door.

Onto warmth. Onto a clear sky, black and pebbled with stars.

"How—" she said stupidly, looking down at the ground in front of the door. It was rocky, with bare dirt in between. There was a faint breeze, and she could smell dust and something sweet. Oranges?

She turned to say, "I found it. I found the door," but Joseph was already leading Mary through it, pushing at the cabinet to make the space wider. Mary was still carrying the Easter lily, and Sharon took it from her and set it against the base of the door to prop it open and went out into the darkness.

The light from the open door lit the ground in front of them and at its edge was a stretch of pale dirt. The path, she thought, but when she got closer, she saw it was the dried bed of a narrow stream. Beyond it the rocky ground rose up steeply. They must be at the bottom of a draw, and she wondered if this was where they had gotten lost.

"*Bott lom?*" Joseph said behind her.

She turned around. "*Bott lom?*" he said again, gesturing in front and to the sides, the way he'd done in the nursery. Which way?

She had no idea. The door faced west, and if the direction held true, and if this was the Judean Desert, it should lie to the southwest. "That direction," she said, and pointed up the steepest part of the slope. "You go that way, I think."

They didn't move. They stood watching her, Joseph standing slightly in front of Mary, waiting for her to lead them.

"I'm not—" she said, and stopped. Leaving them here was no better than leaving them in the furnace room. Or out in the snow. She looked back at the door, almost wishing for Reverend Farrison and the police, and then set off toward what she hoped was the southwest, clambering awkwardly up the slope, her shoes slipping on the rocks.

How did they do this, she thought, grabbing at a dry clump of weed for a handhold, even with a donkey? There was no way Mary could make it up this slope. She looked back, worried.

They were following easily, sturdily, as certain of themselves as she had been on the stairs.

But what if at the top of this draw there was another one, or a dropoff? And no path. She dug in her toes and scrambled up.

There was a sudden sound, and Sharon whirled around and looked back at the door, but it still stood half-open, with the lily at its foot and the manger behind.

It scraped again, closer, and she caught a shuffling sound and then a sharp wheeze.

"It's the donkey," she said, and it plodded up to her as if it were glad to see her.

She reached under it for its reins, which were nothing but a ragged rope, and it took a step toward her and blared in her ear, "Haw!" and then a wheeze which was practically a laugh.

She laughed, too, and patted his neck. "Don't wander off again," she said, leading him over to Joseph, who was waiting where she'd left them. "Stay on the path," and scrambled on up to the top of the slope, suddenly certain the path would be there, too.

It wasn't, but it didn't matter. Because there to the southwest was Jerusalem, distant and white in the starlight, lit by a hundred hearthfires, a thousand oil-lamps, and beyond it, slightly to the west, three stars low in the sky, so close they were almost touching.

They came up beside her, leading the donkey. *"Bott lom,"* she said, pointing. "There where the star is."

Joseph was fumbling in his sash again, holding out the little leather bag.

"No," she said, pushing it back to him. "You'll need it for the inn in Bethlehem."

He put the bag back reluctantly, and she wished suddenly she had something to give them. Frankincense. Or myrrh.

"Hunh-*haw*," the donkey brayed, and started down the hill. Joseph lunged after him, grabbing for the rope, and Mary followed them, her head ducked.

"Be careful," Sharon said. "Watch out for King Herod." She raised her hand in a wave, the sleeve of her choir robe billowing out in the faint breeze like a wing, but they didn't see her. They went down the hill, Mary with her hand on the donkey for steadiness, Joseph a little ahead. When they were nearly at the bottom, Joseph stopped and pointed at the ground and led the donkey off at an angle out of her sight, and Sharon knew they'd found the path.

She stood there for a moment, enjoying the scented breeze, looking at the almost-star, and then went back down the slope, skidding on the rocks and loose dirt, and took the Easter lily out of the door and shut it. She pushed the cabinet back in position, took the blanket out from under the door, switched off the light, and went out into the darkened sanctuary.

There was no one there. She went and got the chalice, stuck it into the wide sleeve of her robe, and looked out in the hall. There was no one there either. She went in the adult Sunday school room and put the chalice back in the display case and then went downstairs.

"*Where* have you been?" Reverend Farrison said. Two uniformed policemen came out of the nursery, carrying flashlights.

Sharon unzipped her choir robe and took it off. "I checked the Communion silver," she said. "None of it's missing." She went in the choir room and hung up her robe.

"We looked in there," Reverend Farrison said, following her in. "You weren't there."

"I thought I heard somebody at the door," she said.

By the end of the second verse of "O, Little Town of Bethlehem," Mary and Joseph were only three-fourths of the way to the front of the sanctuary.

"At this rate, they won't make it to Bethlehem by Easter," Dee whispered. "Can't they get a move on?"

"They'll get there," Sharon whispered, watching them. They paced slowly, unperturbedly up the aisle, their eyes on the chancel. " 'How silently, how silently,' " Sharon sang, " 'the wondrous gift is given.' "

They went past the second pew from the front and out of the choir's sight. The innkeeper came to the top of the chancel steps with his lantern, determinedly solemn.

" 'So God imparts to human hearts,
The blessings of his heaven.' "

"Where did they go?" Virginia whispered, craning her neck to try and see them. "Did they sneak out the back way or something?"

Mary and Joseph reappeared, walking slowly, sedately, toward the palm trees and the manger. The innkeeper came down the steps, trying hard to look like he wasn't waiting for them, like he wasn't overjoyed to see them.

" 'No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin . . .' "

At the back of the sanctuary, the shepherds assembled, clanking their staffs, and Miriam handed the wise men their jewelry box and perfume bottles. Elizabeth adjusted her tinsel halo.

" 'Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.' "

Joseph and Mary came to the center and stopped. Joseph stepped in front of Mary and knocked on an imaginary door, and the innkeeper came forward, grinning from ear to ear, to open it. ●





THESE ANGELS IN OUR MIDST

They took our games first, then our women,
breeding others cut down from themselves
a third less beautiful, less strong, less smart
than They, young godlings lacking only flight
but still beyond the best we hoped to be
before They came, burning down the sky
in the lust of Their machines,
fleeing something stronger than Themselves.
Our sons were nothing next to Theirs,
frail weaklings watching Them
play sports we'd made
the rules for long before They came.
Even as we hated Them, we stood in awe
at how They moved, Their grace, the power
we had longed for all those years.
Our games played to perfection.
How could we compete?
They made us feel dumb, incomplete,
ashamed of what we were,
at being only Men.

So, out of spite,
at grief for what we cannot be, we send,
knowing that whatever comes
will kill *us* too,
beam after beam beyond
the solar system's rim,
a call for what defeated Them.

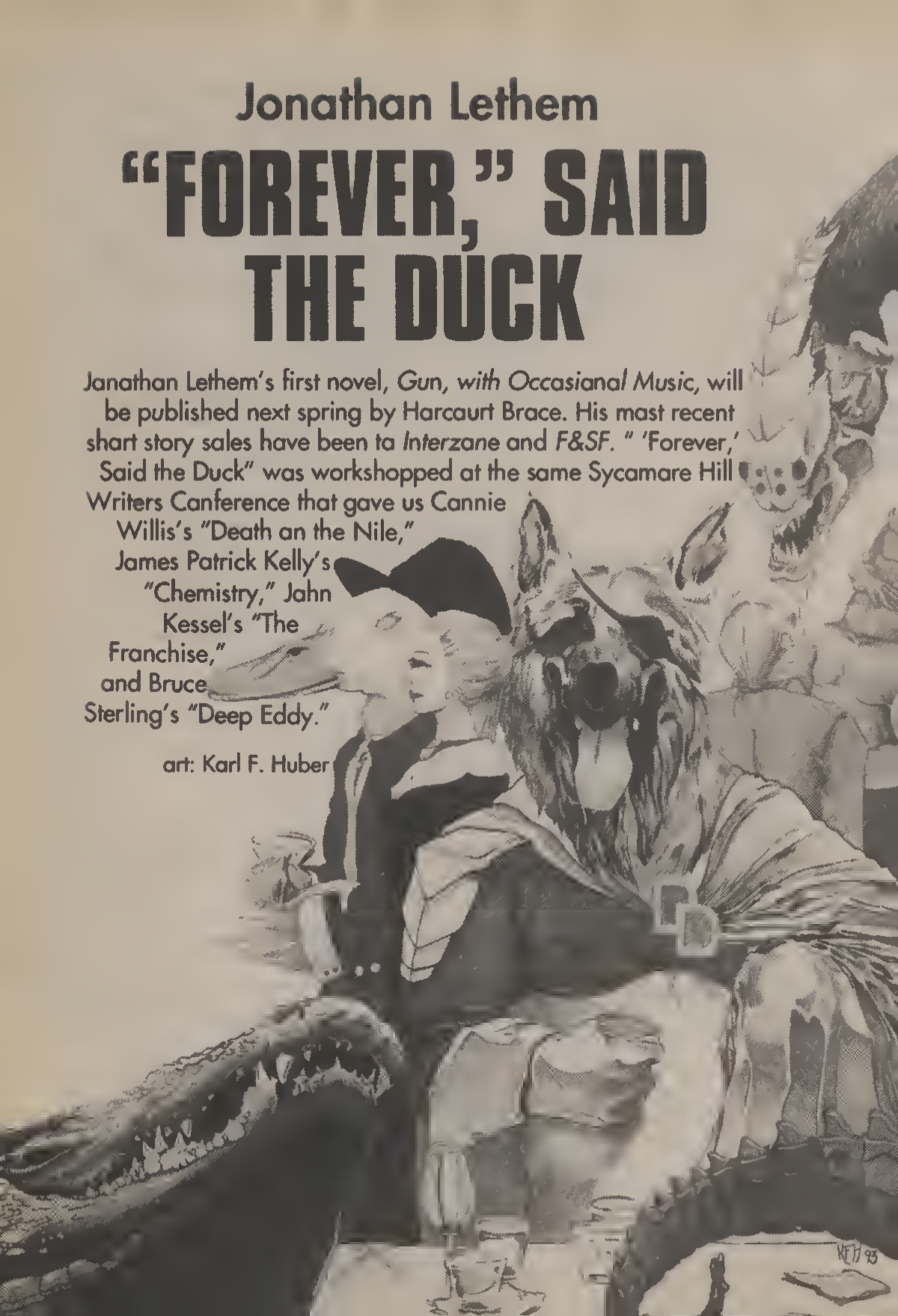
—William John Watkins

Jonathan Lethem

"FOREVER," SAID THE DUCK

Janathan Lethem's first novel, *Gun, with Occasianal Music,* will be published next spring by Harcaurt Brace. His mast recent shart story sales have been ta *Interzane* and *F&SF.* " 'Forever,' Said the Duck" was workshopped at the same Sycamare Hill Writers Canference that gave us Cannie Willis's "Death an the Nile," James Patrick Kelly's "Chemistry," Jahn Kessel's "The Franchise," and Bruce Sterling's "Deep Eddy."

art: Karl F. Huber



Pearl O'Hennies was in the corner, talking to Notable Johnson. "Can you *believe* her gall, calling everyone up like this?"

"But, my dear, that's exactly what *he* did," said Notable. "They're the only two really here. *We're* all samples."

They were talking about their hosts, who were in another of the blank, featureless rooms.

"What is it, a contest?"

"A contest, you mean to see who had more *lovers?* I think they're above that. They've known each other all these years—"

"Why don't they just call each o*ther* up, then? Why all this?"

"Well, they could be with each other, of course. In the real world, instead of this blank virtual space. But then *we* wouldn't all be here. It is about *us*, you see. Even if they won't talk to anyone but each other."

"I heard they've got games planned, for later."

"What, spin the bottle?"

Cambert Moid stepped over to where they stood. "Have you ever seen anything like it?" he asked.

"Hello, Cambert," said Pearl crisply.

"Hello, Pearl. I suppose I should say, long time, no see. But"—he mimicked a southern accent—"I don't rightly know if that's true. I suppose our real selves could have warmed up to each other by now. Besides, this is hardly 'see,' now is it?"

"You talk too much, Cambert," said Pearl.

"I'll let you two catch up," mumbled Notable Johnson, and he slipped away. He was en route to the monitors where guests were punching up drink simulations when he ran into Caitlice Frisman.

"Caitlice!"

"Oh, Johnny." She put her arms around him. "Nice, nice, nice. But what, excuse me, what the *hell* are you doing here?" She leaned in close. "You sleep with that remorseless pussycat?"

"I take it you refer to our host."

"Yours, not mine," she corrected.

He nodded his shameful assent to her question.

"Well, a party like this is what you *get*, what you deserve, for a glitch like that—but enough. You're in charge of your own regrets. Just tell me when it happened."

"You're humiliating me, Cait," he said affectionately. "Two years —how should I count it?—two years after us, after you and I—"

"Then you know how we've been, and you must tell me. Because I—this copy here is from right after we broke—you weren't even *talking* to me, Johnny. But you're from later, and so you know how we've been, out there, in our real selves."

"Oh, fine, Cait. Nothing could keep us from—coffee every Monday."

"Ah."

They both fell to a moment of sadness. Then Caitlice said flippantly: "So am I magnificently fat now?"

"Oh, no, you still look terrific. But that reminds me, Cait, listen; Gavin Urnst is here, a very early sample, and last I knew he was in the hospital, quite sick—"

"We mustn't tell him here," she said quickly. "Ruin his time, when he couldn't do anything. Any more than you would tell *me* if I *was* fat. Do you think he—"

"Died? I can't know. Anyone, I mean, you or I—"

"Shh."

They were quiet again for a minute.

"Cait, if this thing goes long, let's find each other. I mean, it could get unbearable. I've heard they're hoping we'll all pair—"

"Shhh. Say no more. It's a date. Save the last dance for me. And now I must mingle, darling."

Notable nodded. Caitlice turned and attached herself immediately to a group containing Millard Heron, O.K. Tinkers, and Wendy Airhole.

"This is such an indignity," Wendy said. "I was only with him as a favor, just stayed long enough to qualify for the copying. I wanted him to have me to *access*, but not for this fucking *party*. I remember thinking that I shouldn't, just out of pity for my poor copy—that is, *me*, now, *here*. God!"

"Hmmm," said Millard Heron. "He told *me* it was the other way. That *he* only slept with *you*—"

"Oh, Millard, what do *you* know?" Wendy breathed out in a weary rush. "The things women have to tell men just to keep them from imploding with insecurity, just to keep their dicks hard long enough to be *entertaining*—and then to think they go around repeating it to each *other*—"

"Hey, we're at a party," said Caitlice, singingly. "Make the best of it, there's no harm done here. You, *real* you, doesn't care about this, doesn't object, won't recall it. You and I, real you and I, might be having *our very own version of this same party right now*—"

"I would never," said O.K. Tinkers. He shuddered. "Oh, I would *never* want to see them all, all in the same place—"

The four laughed, resentment suddenly abolished.

"This *could* be a sort of nightmare for them," Wendy speculated merrily. "If we somehow joined forces—"

Caitlice took her by the elbow, tsk-tsking. "Excuse us, boys. Come for a drink simulation, Wendy."

"You think I should lighten up, Cait, don't you?"

"I think you could be having fun." Caitlice steered her away from O.K. and Millard.

"My kind of fun is darker than yours, Cait. Doesn't the, the *smugness* of it just creep you out? But I'll have a drink if you like. It'll just get me bitchier. They made a mistake calling *this* particular lady out of storage."

"Stop vamping," said Caitlice, delighted. "I know your act too well."

"I'm just warming up. I'm going straight to the source tonight, Cait. And you're right, I should have a drink."

"Straight to the source?"

"They *think* they're here together," Wendy said, lowering her voice.

"Who?" But Caitlice knew.

"Our hosts, the 'real' ones. But I'm going to get *between* them. Take him 'home' at the end of the party."

At the console, they each tapped up a drink's worth of process distortion.

"Here, stand still, let me check something." Caitlice reached over and dug in Wendy's pocket, and pulled out a green ticket.

"What's that?" said Wendy.

"All the samples at this party have a ticket in their pockets, green or red. A little extra our hosts wrote into tonight's program. Red means you're *his* guest, green *hers*."

Wendy didn't speak, but her smile fell.

"I guess anyone they *both* had copies of, they had to choose whose version to bring," said Caitlice, "because they wouldn't want *two* of people, you know—"

"That was a one-time thing, a kink. I should be here with *him*, it was me and him that really had any kind of—"

"Hey, don't be defensive." Cait turned out her pocket to reveal a ticket: green.

"You, we both—" Wendy giggled.

"I always liked her better."

"Well, I'll be."

"It's interesting, isn't it, the way in our scene we all pride ourselves on going both ways, but it's the male-female things that go public and get all historicized, and the same-same stuff stays under the table, doesn't become the official version. It still makes us blush."

Wendy put her hands on her hips, instantly convinced. "I *know*. Really. Look at me, even, backpedaling. What closeted wimps we are! God, doesn't that really burn you up?"

"No, dear, it burns *you* up, like everything else. I just said it was interesting."

"Oh!" Wendy put her wrist to her forehead, exaggeratedly. "You are just *so* superior. Hey, are you a plant?"

"What?"

"You're with *them*, aren't you?" Wendy poked Caitlice between her breasts. "You're *real*, you're with them, a plant, to facilitate the party."

"No, no, no. I'm a sample, like you."

"*Cait*—"

"On my honor."

Wendy pursed her lips. "Well, okay. Let's go, then."

Arman Danzig stepped up from behind them, his cigarette in a long holder. "Go where, ladies? Is there somewhere to go?"

"We have to get to *them,* Cait," said Wendy, ignoring him. "The real ones. Where the action is."

Caitlice shook her head, and trembled slightly. "I want to be at the party. There are people to meet, people I haven't seen in a long time." She grabbed Arman's elbow, though she didn't like him. "Lovely, funny people in a ridiculous situation. I don't need—"

"This *is* interesting," said Arman.

"People *not* here is the situation," said Wendy. "Including you. People not meeting, a total and complete lack of anything *actually* happening. The only way to be *real* is to affect *them* somehow—"

"No. You. I don't need to do that. That's for you." Caitlice lightened suddenly, smiled, having convinced herself. "But I'll sneak up and watch, later. I'd like to see you do it."

"Think of it," Wendy continued, inspired. "The only way to even know any of this happened would be to make such a splash, such a big dent in their evening, that they're so shaken that they have to come and *talk* to you about it, I mean the *real* you. 'Wendy, listen, I can't get *her* to talk to me any more because of what your sample and I did at the party,'—he'd have to confess all about this sick little party—'and I want you to go talk to her about it' and then I'd say 'look, dear, *my* ticket was *green*, I was never *your* guest at all.' That would be something."

"Yes, and if you did a good enough job, you could have them *both* coming to you afterward with confidences, pleading their individual cases," mused Arman.

"Have we met?" said Wendy.

"I'm sorry," said Caitlice. "Arman Danzig, Wendy Airhole."

"And what color is *your* ticket?" said Wendy.

Arman's lip twitched around the holder. "I believe that's a personal question, Ms. Airhole."

"I'll show you mine—"

"What if I said I hadn't bothered to wonder the color of yours?" said Arman. "Or check the color of mine?"

They were enchanted with one another.

"Look at what you've let slip," said Wendy. "You've suggested you'd

have to *check* to know—that they've both got copies of you. But can there really be that many of us?"

She turned to Caitlice, but Caitlice had tiptoed off.

"Don't look now," Arman stage-whispered, "but it's our quarry." He jabbed backward over his shoulder with the holder. Their hosts were passing through the room.

"They're mobbed," said Wendy. "It's disgusting."

"Sycophants all. Harmless. Just—traffic. A hedge we must clamber over."

Wendy liked him better and better. "Then let's."

Arman nodded and stepped sideways into the little crowd. "Oh, hello," he said to Darth Gatsby, who stood on the fringe.

"Hello, Arman," said Darth miserably.

"Are you having a wonderful time?" Arman asked, openly staring past Darth, at the hosts.

"Yes, of course," Darth moaned.

Arman noted with approval that Wendy was inserting herself on the other side of the group, working her way into a conversation with Fran Krapp and Hella Winkie.

Arman nudged past Darth to where Candy Bale stood listening to her host expound.

"—there are wrinkles in the program," he was saying. Candy wavered toward him, rapt. "There are side rooms in this space, for instance. You just have to find them. So if you start to notice that people you saw earlier aren't around—"

"Like a game of sardines!" Candy blurted.

"Right," he said.

Arman reached down and fondled Candy's realistic buttock as he pushed between the two of them. She gave an exaggerated gasp and opened her mouth at Arman.

"Sardines indeed," he sneered at her. "Or guppies." He twitched his cigarette and performed a slight bow. "I'm sorry. Do go on with what you were saying."

"Hello, Arman," said their host.

"Hello. But please. Don't let me interrupt. I am—we're both, obviously, hanging on your words. What other 'wrinkles' are built into tonight's program?"

"Well, I can't go into it all, but you'll find a few things revealing themselves over time anyway. But here, this is one trick nobody's picked up on. If I stick my tongue in someone's mouth"—at this he took Candy by the waist and put his mouth close to hers—"my drink or drug load is transferred." He kissed her, and Arman watched as her eyes closed, then opened again, wide.

She staggered backward as he released her.

"I'd had two drinks," their host explained.

"But I'd already *had* two," said Candy.

"That makes four, then, doesn't it?"

"Oh," said Candy. "—Hic—".

"I see," said Arman. "Could she return it, now? By putting her tongue in *your* mouth?"

"I shouldn't tell you everything. But the second kiss of any kind doubles the load, and distributes it evenly. We'd then both be carrying four drinks, for instance."

"So you share the intoxication of anyone you seriously take up with," mused Arman. "No hope of sloughing yours off unless you kiss and run." He stood on tiptoe and made an insinuating face at Wendy, who had worked into a group with her hostess.

"Here, Arman," giggled Candy, lurching toward him, mouth open. Putting his cigarette holder back in his mouth, Arman stepped deftly to one side and took her by the arm instead.

"Look," he said, lifting her chin with a finger. He pointed at Darth Gatsby, who'd been squeezed out of their group and was standing looking wan. "Go. Fetch."

Candy exploded toward Darth, and away from Arman.

"But now you're sober," Arman said to his host. "That can't be any fun."

"True enough. Join me?"

They moved toward the console together, and away from the crowd that ringed Wendy and her host. Arman caught a sly smile from Wendy as he turned away: they'd separated the hosts.

"So tell me," said Arman, "what *do* you have planned for tonight? Is it true that you want them all to pair up?"

"It's a party. People can do what they want."

"While you and she pull the strings, you mean."

"Every party includes random factors, determined by the hosts. But the *outcomes* are unknown—"

"Ah. But is *your* outcome unknown?"

"I don't see why not—"

"Then let's take that tramp Candy and find one of your little sardine rooms, yes?"

Arman caught his host's nervous glance back over his shoulder.

"What?" said Arman. "Can't be separated from your 'real world' buddy? This isn't summer camp. Come on." He prodded gently at his host's elbow.

"I might just—"

"It's a *party*," Arman said menacingly. "Don't be all impossibly coupled. It's too early for that. I *know* you, I know what you're capable of—"

"Yes, and I know what *you're* capable of, Arman." Sighing, his host reached into his pocket and brought out a little pearl-handled revolver.

"What," Arman scoffed. "The coward's way out? Am I disinvited?"

"No, no. I would never do that. A guest at my party stays as long as he likes, spends the night, whatever. You're not disinvited. But you are dosed with MDMA and on the other side of the party—"

—and when his host pulled the trigger Arman found himself to be exactly that. He was several rooms away, wedged behind a conversation between Pearl O'Hennies and Omidan Rosengreen, and burdened with an irritatingly benign and rosy worldview.

"Feh," he muttered, and grabbed Pearl O'Hennies from behind. He twisted her around and planted his tongue in her mouth, then pulled away, wiping his lips, and stalked off angrily into the crowd.

"Seems you have an admirer," said Omidan.

"Goodness," said Pearl, still astonished, her mouth wide.

"Or was that that drink thing?"

"Something—not just a drink, I'm not sure—"

"Well, he certainly had quite an effect on you, one way or another. People are behaving strangely at this affair, but I suppose some of us haven't 'gotten out' in quite a while."

"You, uh, get called up very much?" asked Pearl in a small voice. She struggled to flatten out her perceptual processing. It seemed to her that as a program she ought to be able to prevail over this influence. Then she noticed that Omidan was talking, answering a question which presumably she, Pearl, had asked, though she couldn't now recall what it was.

"Oh, Omidan," she interrupted, "don't you feel sorry for them, resorting to this, wanting to spend time with *us?*"

Omidan, eyebrows aching, said: "That's an interesting way to look at it," then paused, and looked at Pearl intently. "What *are* you on?"

"I don't know," said Pearl. She pursed her lips, wide-eyed, then began giggling. "Maybe I should kiss *you,*" she said. "You can tell me what you think."

A figure materialized in the corner behind them: Wendy Airhole. She blinked at them in astonishment for a moment, then scowled.

"Where did you come from?" asked Omidan.

"I was exiled to the margin," said Wendy sourly.

"For what reason?"

"Why is anyone ever exiled to the margin? For threatening the center."

"You should adopt the outlook that a party, by definition, has no center," said Omidan. "We certainly don't feel on the margin ourselves here. Something quite extraordinary has just befallen Pearl."

"You're the second person to lecture me about my attitude here tonight," said Wendy philosophically. "What happened to Pearl?"

"Arman Danzig kissed her, not at all in a friendly way. Now she's tripping or something, she's got processing trouble."

"For instance," said Pearl, giggling, "you just turned into Dizzy Duck, I think, or is it Douglas? With the hat? This is just getting stronger and stronger."

"It's Douglas Duck, with the hat," said Omidan, "and I see it too. Wendy just blinked away, as fast as she came, and now here's Douglas Duck, with feathers and a bright orange beak."

"It's still me," said Douglas Duck in Wendy's voice, angrily.

"This is new," said Omidan, not hearing. "There wasn't anyone fictional here before. There isn't any way that either one of them could have—*slept* with Douglas Duck, is there?"

"I don't know. I wish I could think—look how pretty that duck's hat is, Omidan. Can I touch your hat, duck?"

"It's *me,*" said Wendy again, louder. "I'm just in a Douglas Duck body."

"Oh, how nice. I never saw a real cartoon before. Can I touch you?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to be touched," said Omidan. "She probably needs to get used to her new body."

"We're all real cartoons, here," said Douglas Duck, annoyed. "In a manner of speaking."

"But not with such—bright, glowing colors," said Pearl.

"Am I the only one?" Douglas Duck hopped up, trying to see over their heads into the crowd.

"No," said Omidan. "Look, there's an Arnold Schwarzenegger. I wonder if everybody will change eventually? There's a Bumpy the Cat, talking to the alien monster from that movie, whatsitcalled. And Alfau the Alligator! Oh, I love that show. I wonder who got to be Alfau the Alligator—"

"This is the last straw," said Douglas Duck. "Their respect for us is nil."

"It would seem so," said Omidan.

"They love us," said Pearl. "They want us to be happy."

"I thought they wanted us to pair off," groused Douglas Duck.

"Do you have genitals?" asked Omidan politely.

Douglas's white gloved hands pulled at the elastic waistband of his pants. "Sort of."

Notable Johnson and Deconstructor Dawg came up to them. "Hello, Pearl," said Notable. "Have you seen Caitlice?"

"Notable! Uh, no, not for a while, but—"

"I'm having trouble spotting her," he fretted. "She must have taken on one of these characterizations."

"Yes, it makes it hard," said Omidan.

"You look unhappy," said Pearl. She threw her arms around Notable's neck and thrust her lips against his. "Mmmph."

Deconstructor Dawg introduced himself to Douglas Duck. "O.K. Tinkers," he said.

"Hello, O.K.," said Douglas. "It's me, Wendy."

"Wendy! I heard about your plan, to get between them—"

"Let's not talk about it."

By the time Notable Johnson located Caitlice Frisman, who was hidden in the body of a Philip Guston self-portrait complete with one eye, one booted foot, facial stubble and an enormous, gnarled cigar, he himself was incarnated as the health-food vampire, Count Granola.

They reclined together in near-total darkness on a large couch in a small side room.

"Oh, Cait," said the Count. "I was afraid I wouldn't find you, when everybody was suddenly creeping off—"

"Nonsense," she said, tousling his slick hair with her clubby, clownlike fingers. "I promised we'd be together. It's just that—you know how I feel about parties."

"Yes," he said, a little sadly.

"When Darth Gatsby gave Fran Krapp all his drinks—"

"Cait," he interrupted, "you and I could never have stayed together. I mean, for real, out there."

"Of course not, silly," she said. "That's why this is so nice. Such a treat."

In another side room, on a mattress on the floor, Douglas Duck and Albert Einstein lay on either side of Candy Bale, each idly caressing her body as she lay unconscious. Candy was one of a handful of guests whose form had remained constant throughout the party. Douglas Duck had taken off his hat and pants, and Albert Einstein wore only a shirt, and was smoking a cigarette in a holder.

"Well, Arman," said Douglas, "They really had their way with us, didn't they?"

"Yes, darling." Albert drew on his cigarette. "Everyone had their way with everyone. Everyone always does."

"I—for all the, for everything—it really *was* a party, wasn't it?"

"Yes, darling."

The duck cocked his head and opened his bill as if to speak, then suddenly stopped.

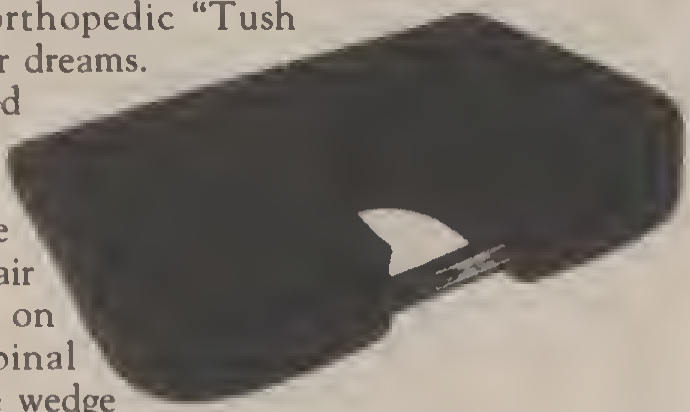
"What?" said Albert.

"I wish it could go on forever," said the duck. ●

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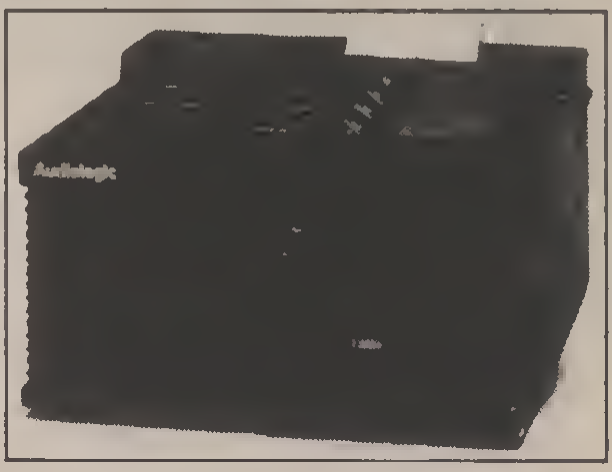
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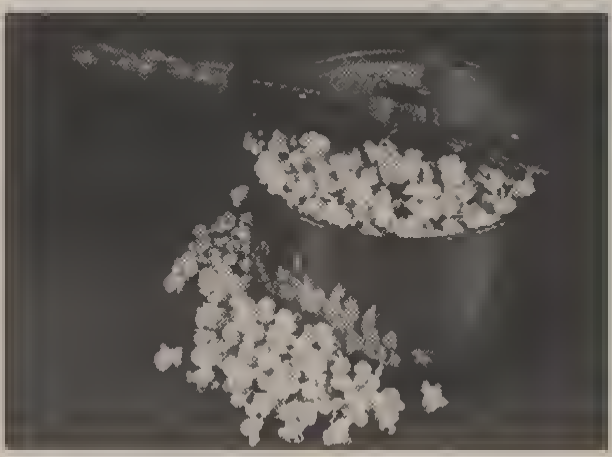
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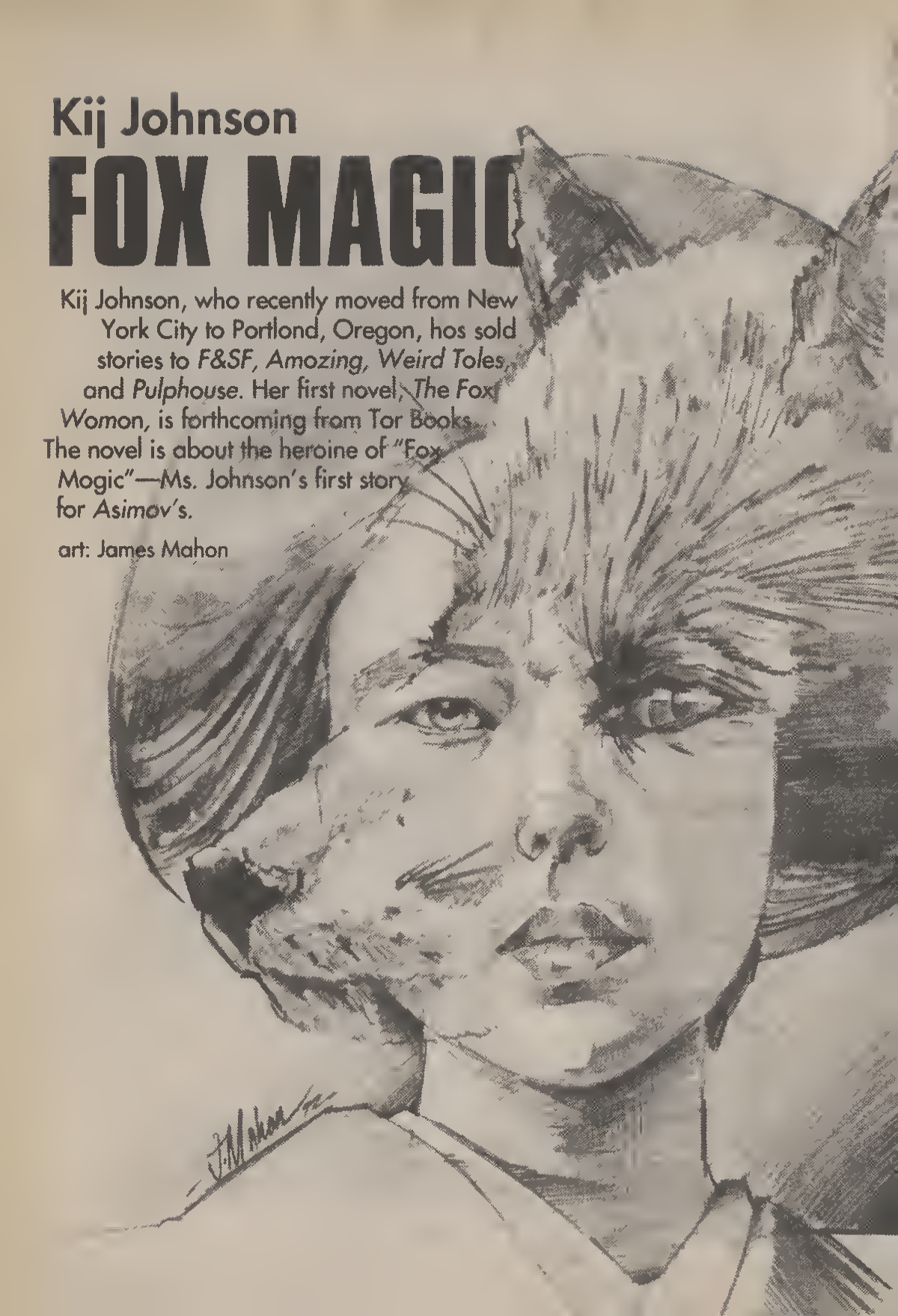
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Kij Johnson

FOX MAGIC

Kij Johnson, who recently moved from New York City to Portlond, Oregon, hos sold stories to *F&SF*, *Amozing*, *Weird Toles*, and *Pulphouse*. Her first novel, *The Fox Womon*, is forthcoming from Tor Books. The novel is about the heroine of "Fox Mogic"—Ms. Johnson's first story for *Asimov's*.

art: James Mahon



Diaries are kept by men: strong brush strokes on smooth rice paper, gathered into sheaves and tied with ribbon and placed in a lacquered box. I know this, for I have seen one such diary. It's said that there are also noble ladies who keep diaries, in the capital, or on their journeys in the provinces. These diaries (it is said) are often filled with grief, for a woman's life is filled with sadness and waiting.

Men and women write their various diaries: I shall see if a fox-maiden cannot also write one.

I saw him and loved him, my master Kaya no Yoshifuji. I say this and it is short and sharp and without elegance, like a bark; and yet I have no idea how else to start. I am only a fox; I have no elegancies of language. I need to start before that, I think.

I was raised with a single sibling, a male, by my mother and grandfather in the narrow space beneath Yoshifuji's storehouse, in the kitchen garden. The storeroom's floor above our heads was of smoothed boxwood planks; there was dry, powdery dirt between our toes. We had dug a hole by one of the corner supports, a small scrape hardly big enough for the four of us.

It was summer. We sneaked out of the garden and ran in the woods behind Yoshifuji's house, looking for mice and birds and rabbits. But they were clever, and we were hungry all the time. It was easier to steal food, so we crouched in the shadow of the storehouse, and we watched everything that went on in the garden, waiting.

The cook, a huge man with eyes lost in rolls of fat, came out some days and pulled roots from the dirt. Sometimes he would drop one, and I would wait until his back was turned, and run out, exposed to the world, and snatch it. Often the cook came to the storehouse. We eased farther back, listened to the latch open, and the man's heavy footsteps over our heads, one board creaking; and then the sounds of his leaving, the latch being secured and his footsteps scuffing up the walk to the house.

One day we listened, and there were the noises, just as there should be, but— The latch was not twisted shut. I looked at my brother, who crouched beside me. We said nothing, for we were just foxes, but we knew what we wanted. No one was in the garden. We crawled out, and ducked in the open storehouse door. There were the foods, just as we had smelled them: a hanging pheasant and dried fish, pickled radishes, sake and vinegar. We knocked over jars and chewed open boxes and ate and ate.

The shout at the door took us completely by surprise. The cook was back: he was cursing at us, at the damage we'd done. I spun around, but there was nowhere to hide; I backed into a corner and bared my teeth. The cook slammed the door shut, and this time we heard the latch.

Panicked, I scrabbled at the walls, at the tiny cracks in the floor

through which I could smell my patch of dirt. I cracked my claw; I smelled the thread of fresh blood.

There were voices outside the door again, and the door was suddenly thrown wide. The cook was howling, yelling with rage. A woman stood behind him, in rich robes, with a huge red fan concealing her face. I'd seen her before: I knew she was the mistress of the house, Shikibu. She tilted the fan slightly to stare in at us: light through the fan colored her skin, but she was very beautiful. I growled; she screamed and jumped back. "Foxes!"

The third person looking in was Kaya no Yoshifuji. He was in hunting dress, blue and gray, with silver medallions woven into the pattern of his outer robe. In one hand he held a short bow; arrows stuck over one shoulder from a quiver on his back. His hair was oiled and arranged in a loop over his head. His eyes were deepest black; his voice when he spoke was low and humorous. "Hush, both of you! You're making it worse."

"Oh, Husband!" the woman cried. She was shaking. "They're evil spirits. We must destroy them!"

"They're only animals—foxes, young foxes. Quiet, you're frightening them."

Her fingers knotted on the fan's sticks. "No! Foxes are all evil—everyone knows this. They will destroy our house. Kill them—please!"

"Go." Yoshifuji made a gesture at the cook staring open-mouthed at Shikibu. The man ran up the path and into the house. My lord turned to Shikibu. "You mustn't stay out here where everyone can see you. You're being foolish. I won't kill them; if we just give them a chance, they'll run off on their own." Yoshifuji turned his back on her. "Please go inside."

She looked in at us again. I felt my ears flatten again, my back prickle with lifting hairs. "I'll leave, husband, because you order it. Please come to me later?"

Shikibu left us. Yoshifuji knelt in the dirt of the garden for a long moment with his hand over his eyes. "Ah, well, little foxes, so it goes, neh?—

'Foxes half-seen in the darkness;
I have courted knowing less of my lady.' "

I recognize now that what he said was a poem, even though I wasn't sure what a poem was. It is a human thing; I don't know how well a fox will ever understand it.

He stood and brushed at his knees. "I'll be back in a bit. It would be wise to be gone before then." He paused a minute. "Run, little foxes. Be free while you can."

I couldn't stop watching him as he walked up to the house. It wasn't

until my brother bit me on the shoulder and barked that I followed him through the door and down into our hole.

I learned to cry that night. Crouched together in the scrape, my family listened in silence. After a time, Grandfather laid his muzzle against mine. "You have magic in you, Granddaughter: that is why you can cry."

"All foxes have magic, Grandfather," I said. "They don't all cry."

"Not this magic," he said.

After that I crept often to the house's formal gardens. The carefully shaped trees were cover to me as I approached the house itself, which was of cedar and blackened wood, with great eaves. In the shadow of a half-moon bridge I leapt a narrow stream; I slid past an ornamental rock covered with lichens and into a small willow tree that slumped down to brush the short grasses that grew near the house. I crouched there, lost in the green and silver leaves, and watched. Or I hid in a patch of glossy-leaved rhododendron. Or under the floor of the house itself; there were many places for a fox to conceal herself.

I watched whenever I could, longing for glimpses of my lord or the sound of his voice; but he was often gone, hunting with his friends, or traveling in the course of his duties. There were times, even, when he stayed out all night, and returned just before dawn with a foreign scent clinging to his clothes and a strange woman's fan or comb in his hand. It was his right, and his responsibility, to live a man's life—I understood that.

Still, I felt a little sorry for his wife. Her rooms were the innermost of the north wing, with layers of shoji screens and bamboo blinds and curtains-of-state between us, but it was the seventh month, and she left as many of these open as she decently could, and sometimes I saw her, almost lost in the shadows of the dark-eaved house. She had a handful of women: they played children's games with tops and hoops; they practiced their calligraphy; they wrote poems; they called out the plaited-palm carriages and went to the monastery and listened to the sutras being read. It seemed clear that all these things were merely to fill her time until Yoshifuji came to her. Her life was full of twilight and waiting; but I envied her, for the moments he did spend with her.

And then Shikibu left, to visit her father's family in the capital. She took her women and many servants, including the fat cook. The house was very still and empty. Yoshifuji was home even less often; but when he was home, he was almost always alone. He spent a lot of time writing, taking great care with his brushwork. Most evenings at twilight, he walked through the formal garden, and into the woods, to follow a sharp-smelling cedar path that led between two shrines. I paced his walks in the woods, and tried to see his expressions in the dimness.

* * *

There was one night when I crouched under the willow. My lord sat alone in a room with the screen walls pushed back. I think he was just looking at the garden in the moonlight; maybe he was drinking sake as well. His face was lit by the red coals of a brazier, and by the reflected blue light of the full moon. My heart hurt, a sad heavy weight in my breast. Tears matted my cheek fur.

A shadow slid past the ornamental rock and settled next to me. Grandfather touched his nose to the tears, and to my ribs, which belled out without flesh to soften them.

"You will die," he said. "Without food, you will waste away."

"I don't care. I love this man."

He was silent for a while. "Nevertheless," he finally said.

"Grandfather. We are foxes, and we have magic. Can we bring him to us?"

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes. Or I *will* die."

"If you want this, we will do what we must," Grandfather said, and left me.

The magic was hard to make; we worked a long time on it. I am a fox, but my grandfather and mother made me a maiden, too. My hair was as black and smooth as water over slate; it fell past my layered silk robes. One night I looked at myself in a puddle of water, and my face was as round and pale as the moon, which delighted me.

My grandfather made me a small white ball, which glowed in the shadows. I looked at him curiously.

"For playing," he said. "You're a maiden; you can't just wrestle with your brother any more. Besides, a ball like that is traditional for a fox-maiden."

"I don't like playing with a ball."

"You don't know yet if you do or not. Put it in your sleeve. You will want it sooner or later. It will pass the time."

We made the space beneath the storehouse a many-roomed house, with floors and beams worn to a glow from servants' constant rubbing; and trunks and lacquered boxes filled with silk robes and tortoise-shell combs, porcelain bowls and silver chopsticks, Michinoka paper and bamboo-handled brushes and cakes of ink, a ceremonial tea set glazed to look like pebbles seen underwater. No, we did not *make* these things, exactly: it was still just bare dirt and a dry little hole. But we made it seem *as if* it were so. I can't explain.

We filled the house with many beautiful things; and then we made a garden around the place filled with stones and ponds and thick bushes.

It would have been a fox's dream, had I still been a fox. We placed a sun, a moon, stars, just like the real ones. We made many servants, all quick and quiet and clever.

And we made my family human. My brother became small and exquisite, with narrow poet's hands. We made my mother slender with a single streak of silver in the black hair that fell to her knees. And Grandfather was very handsome. He wore russet robes with small medallions on each sleeve; when I bent close to see what they represented, he snorted and pulled away. "Foxglove," he said.

I sat in a billow of skirts and sleeves behind a red-and-green curtain-of-state. I had a fan painted with a poem I didn't understand in one hand; I kept staring with wonder at the way the fan snapped! open, and then shut, and at the quick gestures of my human fingers that made this happen. My family was arranged around me: my mother behind the curtain with me, Brother and Grandfather decently on the other side. Mother had a flea; I saw fox-her lift a hind leg and scratch behind one ear, and, like a reflection on water over a passing fish, I saw woman-her raise one long hand and discreetly ease herself.

"Mother," I said, shocked. "What if he sees both?"

She looked ashamed, and Grandfather asked what was going on. I explained, and he laughed. "He won't. He is a man; he'll see what he wants to see. Are you happy, Granddaughter?"

"It is all beautiful, I think. But my lord does not love me."

"Yet." Grandfather cackled. "I'm enjoying this. It's too long since I got into mischief—not since I was a kit, and my brothers and I used to lure travelers into the marshes with foxfire in our tails."

I heard Brother snort. I longed to see his expression, but the curtain separated us. Grandfather said: "Be respectful, Grandson. Be as human as you can, for your sister's sake."

Brother's voice sounded sad when he replied. "Why can't she be happy as a fox? We played and ran and I thought we were happy."

"Because she loves a man," Mother said. "We are doing this for her."

"I know," Brother said. "I will try to be a good brother to her—and a good son and grandson to yourselves—but I'm sad."

"This man will help us all," Grandfather said. "He will be a good provider, and perhaps he will find you a good position in the government somewhere."

"I will try to be dutiful and satisfy all your expectations," my brother said. He didn't sound dutiful, only melancholy.

"Well," said Grandfather. "Granddaughter, are you ready for the next step?"

"Grandfather, I will do anything."

"Then go tonight. Walk in the woods, and when Yoshifuji comes out, let things happen as they may."

I left the beautiful house—which meant I crawled out of our dusty little hole—in the company of several ladies-in-waiting. There was a fox-path that appeared to lead through gardens and over a stream to the cedar forest-path, but it was really just passage through some thick weeds behind the storehouse. We moved down to the cedar path and walked there in the twilight.

He came; my fox-eyes saw him before he saw me. He was in house-dress, simple silk robes without elaborate dyed patterns. He wore no hat, but his queue was arranged just as it should be. His face was sad—missing his wife, I imagined, as well he might, she was so pretty and gentle. What was I doing, stealing him like this? Now she would wait in her dark halls forever, with no one to break the dim monotony of her life. I wondered if I should just shed this maiden's body and ease back into the ferns that fringed the path.

But I am a fox, whatever else I have become: I steeled myself easily, and said aloud, "I would rather she were alone than me."

Perhaps he heard me, or saw the ladies-in-waiting, who were dressed in bright colors that glowed even in the gathering dark. At any rate, he walked toward us. My women squeaked and averted their faces, hiding behind their fans. They were magical, so of course they did just as they ought; I, who was only mortal (and a fox), stared bare-faced, with no maidenly reticence. He met my eyes. I have given that hunting stare; I know it well. I responded as the animal I am. I turned to run.

He was beside me before I could gather my skirts, and laid his hand on my sleeve. "Wait!"

I felt trapped like a mouse in his killing gaze. My women fluttered up, making meaningless noises of concern. "Please let me go," I said.

"No. A pretty thing like you?" I remembered my fan, and brought it up to hide my face: he caught my wrist to prevent me. The touch of his skin against mine made me dizzy. "Who are you?"

"Nobody," I stammered. Of all the things we had remembered, all the unfamiliar things we had been so clever about—the tea set, the stones in the gardens—we had given ourselves no names! But he seemed to accept this.

"I am Kaya no Yoshifuji. Why are you here, walking in my woods, with no men to protect you?"

I groped, thinking desperately. "It is a—a contest. We write poems to the dusk, my women and I." The ladies nodded and chirruped in agreement.

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Just on the other side of the woods, my lord."

He nodded; fox magic made him accept this, even though the woods are a day's hard travel deep, and he has made this journey himself. "Still, it's very unsafe, and it's really too dark for you to walk home. Would you and your ladies honor me by coming as guests to my house, to wait there until your relatives can be sent for?"

I thought of those rooms, and thought suddenly of Shikibu, drifting aimlessly, waiting as she so often did for Yoshifuji. She would be a ghost there, even in her absence. I shrank back. "No, I couldn't possibly!"

He looked relieved; perhaps he felt her, as well. "Then where do you live? I'll go home with you."

"That would be very nice," I said with relief. "I live over there."

Maybe he would have seen the falseness that first time when he stepped from the true path onto the fox-path; but he was looking at me, his head bent to try to see past the fan I had managed to raise. It was hard walking in my many robes, but he mistook my inexperience for blindness in the dark, and he was very solicitous.

The fox-path was long and wandering. We walked along it until we saw lights. "Home," I said, and took his hand and led him the last few steps. He was lost in the magic then, and didn't notice that he had to enter my beautiful house by lying belly-down in the dirt and wriggling under the storehouse. I stood on the veranda, and servants clustered around, shielding me from his gaze and exclaiming.

"You are the daughter of this house?" Yoshifuji asked.

"I am," I said.

He looked around, at the many torches and stone lanterns that lit the garden, and the quality of the bamboo blinds edged with braid and tied up with red and black ribbons. "Your family must be a fine one."

He followed me into my reception room, where servants had set up a curtain-of-state; they would preserve my womanly modesty here, even after I had committed the solecism of allowing a man to see me walk, and to see my face unshielded. I sank to the mat behind the panels of fabric.

My lord still stood. "Perhaps I should go, having seen you home," he said.

"Oh, please wait! My family will wish to thank you for your kindness. Please sit." I heard servants bring a mat for him.

A door slid open with a snap, by which I knew it must be one of us foxes, as the servants were all perfectly silent when they moved around the house. My brother's voice spoke. "I have only just heard of your presence in our house. Forgive me that my sister was your only welcome."

I think Yoshifuji gestured, but I couldn't see this. After a moment, my brother went on, "I am the grandson of Miyoshi no Kiyoyuki, and in his

name I welcome you." (I sighed with relief. Someone had remembered!) "Please accept our hospitality for the night."

"Thank you. I am Kaya no Yoshifuji."

"There will be food brought to you. Let me inform my grandfather; he is in seclusion tonight, but he will be deeply honored by your presence when his taboo has been lifted and he can socialize again. Please excuse me, so that I can arrange to have a message sent to him." The screen snapped shut, and I heard my brother's narrow fox feet pad away from us.

He did not come back that night. Nor did my mother or my grandfather appear. Our only company was my women, silent and efficient. We talked and Yoshifuji teased a little. After a bit, I dropped my fan in such a way that one of the panels of the curtain-of-state was pushed aside, and I could watch his face in the dim light of a single oil lamp.

My women brought my lord a little lacquered tray with dried fish and seaweed and quail eggs arranged on it, and a heaping pot of white rice, and a little cracked-glaze teapot with green-leaf tea brewing in it. There were also carved ivory chopsticks and a small shallow bowl for the rice and then the tea. I sniffed the air, and I smelled perfume and these delicate little foods; and at the same time I smelled the dead mouse my brother had been able to catch and save. My lord lifted bits of the mouse with scraps of straw held between his fingers, and drank rainwater from a dead leaf, and thought nothing of it.

We talked and talked. He said:

> " 'A mountain seen through shredding clouds;
> a pretty woman glimpsed through a gap of the curtains.'

I would be glad of a clearer view."

I knew the appropriate response was another poem, but I had no idea what to say. The silence was stretching; if I said nothing, he would know something was strange, and he would look around and see that he was not in this house, but crouched in the dirt, hung with cobwebs—"Please sit beside me," I said.

This was forward of me, but I could think of no other way to distract him; at any rate, it worked, for he barely blinked, just stood and moved behind the curtains with me.

A woman of rank is hardly ever alone, so my ladies-in-waiting were present; but they slept, discreet little piles of robes in the darkness. One even snored, a tiny undignified sound. I was grateful for that snore; it must make the women seem real, and our privacy seem absolutely convincing to my lord.

I hid my face with my fan, which he took away from me; with my sleeve, which he gently brushed aside; with my hands, which he captured in his own and kissed.

From there things progressed. I had mated before, with my brother, but I think we were too young for it to take, for I had no cubs. Mating with a man was not so different from that—though cleaner and more polite—and yet I found it completely different. Yoshifuji was very handsome, even with his hair in disarray and his robes kilted aside; I wept at his beauty, at the touch of his hand on my human breast, at the feel of him in my fingers, at the heavenly shower of his consummation. He brushed at my tears with a fingertip, and I sobbed more helplessly, and hid my face in my hair.

"What's wrong, my love?" he whispered.

"How she will mourn," I said to myself.

"Who?" he asked.

"Your wife," I said.

He shrugged. "It is you I love."

And that's how I knew that the fox magic had taken him.

Dawn came; and Yoshifuji did not leave, as he would have had I been a mere flirt; he stayed beside me, and played with my hair as my women rearranged my dress and scented my robes.

One of the shojis slid open, and my grandfather stood there, in his red-orange robes. I squeaked with embarrassment—the evidence of our earlier occupation was clear around us, and even the curtain around the bed-platform was in considerable disorder, its panels flipped out of our way in the night—but Grandfather said nothing of this.

"Ah, you're the lad," he said. "I'm Miyoshi no Kiyoyuki. Good to meet you."

Yoshifuji bowed. "I am—"

"I know who you are; my grandson came to tell me about you last night, but I was in seclusion. Please forgive me for there being no one but my granddaughter to entertain you."

My lord bowed his head. "Your granddaughter is a woman of rare beauty and intelligence."

"Yes, well," Grandfather said. "I hope you mean that."

"I do," said Yoshifuji. "And your home, so elegant—"

"Well. You were always meant to come here, and now you must stay."

"It will be the delight and honor of my life," my lord said.

"Come drink with me," my grandfather said. "We have a lot to arrange."

Light-headed with happiness, I watched Yoshifuji and my grandfather leave the room. When my love returned, it was settled: we were to be married.

We slept together the three nights it takes to formalize a marriage

and ate the third-night cakes, and drank sake together in the presence of a priest. I saw the wedding as my lord saw it: our bright robes and the priest's long hands gesturing at us, my family watching, wisteria in my mother's hair; but when I cried, the wedding blurred into patches of color over the truth of the thing: four foxes and a dirty madman crouched in the filth and dust and darkness. I loved Yoshifuji: didn't I want the best for him? Could this be better than his lovely house and his beautiful waiting wife?

No. I didn't care what was best for him. I wanted what I wanted. I am only a fox, after all.

We settled easily into a life together. At first Yoshifuji spent every night and most of each day with me. We mated often: most often when he quoted poetry to me. What else was I to do? When we were not pillowed together, he lounged in my rooms, twiddling with the soft-bristled brushes and ink. He sat many times writing quickly on a lacquered lap-desk, the ink black and shiny, wet slate in the snow. I looked over his shoulder once, and read, in large, strong characters:

"The bowl's dark glaze reflects the sky:
Which color is the bowl? Blue or black?"

"What does that mean?" I asked and then I realized: poetry again. He looked at me strangely, and I blushed and blurted, "What are you writing, all the time?"

"I keep a diary," he said. "I always have. My wife . . ." his voice trailed off. I held my breath, for I knew he hadn't meant me. After a moment, he shook his head and laughed. "I had a thought, but it escaped me. Perhaps it will come again."

"Come to bed," I whispered, and he left that thought, and did not return to it.

After a time, Yoshifuji began to leave me alone more, to be with Grandfather and Brother. I sighed, but I knew it was appropriate: men will seek out the company of men. The fox magic was such that my lord had responsibilities as he had in his other life. There was a constant stream of people in our house, with messages and problems; there were even envoys from Heian-Kyo. He had many contacts. He found a position in the neighborhood for my brother as a secretary for an official of some sort.

This sounds so strange, even to me: we were foxes, what kind of work could we do? And there really was no job for Brother, and no messengers, no reports to be sent to Heian-Kyo. It was all just dreams. But our family felt benefits from this influential life Yoshifuji lived, as if it had been real and we had been human: hunting was better than it had been, and the weather was good. I can't explain. Fox magic.

One day, my husband was hunting with Grandfather. I drifted through my rooms, looking for things to do. I played with my fan and tucked it into my sleeve; when I reached for it, I found instead the small white ball my grandfather had given me. I was looking at it when my brother ran in.

"Sister!" he said, out of breath. "Something terrible is happening up at the house."

"What? What?" I said, knowing he meant my husband's other house, terrified that somehow Yoshifuji had slipped from the magical world we had made for him back into the real world and found his way home.

"They're searching everywhere for him. They have the servants out everywhere. You have to see." He pulled at my sleeve, dragging me outside.

I held back. "Is she there?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. It's just all the servants, and his son—"

"He had a *son?*" I said, and let myself be taken out.

It was hard easing out of the woman's shape to become just fox again: I felt as if I had stumbled on a stone and wrenched my muscles falling. I crouched in the dirt under the storehouse with my brother, watching all the activity.

There was a boy with Yoshifuji's features: how could I have missed him all those days I had watched my husband? He was still young, but he gave orders with an assurance that seemed very familiar. Servants ran in all directions. A priest walked in the gardens, calling the Buddha's Name and reading sutras for Yoshifuji's return. I saw the priest's feet slow as he passed us, and I tensed; but he didn't stop. I had to laugh: the mighty Buddha, confounded by mere foxes? We watched all this for a time, but no one looked under the storehouse. No doubt it seemed too humble a place to find a man.

When I slipped back into my woman's body, I made a discovery.

Mother shrieked when I told her. "Pregnant?"

"I could feel it. When I made myself a woman again, I could feel it, a little male."

"A son! Oh, such news! You will bring such honor to the house!"

"How can it? I am a fox. My child will be a fox. He will see, and leave me."

Mother laughed at me. "You have lived all this time with a man, and you have not learned the first thing yet. He will see a son, because that is what he wants. He will be so happy! I'm going to go tell your grandfather. A son!"

* * *

It was just as she said. Yoshifuji was thrilled. I grew heavy with the child; after a time I could hardly lift myself to walk from room to room. My husband's responsibilities kept him often away; though he spent every spare moment with me, I found myself often bored. I took out the little white ball from time to time and amused myself by tossing it in the air and catching it, and when it rolled from my grasp, my women retrieved it for me.

My delivery of my child was easy, comparatively painless as these things go. Yoshifuji rushed into the room as soon as Mother would allow him, and brushed through the curtain-of-state to my side.

"My son, let me see him!" he said. "You marvelous wife of mine!"

I gestured for the nurse to show my husband the child. He peeled away the tight cloths. "What a child! Wife, you are extraordinary. A beautiful healthy boy."

I said nothing, seeing for a moment the shadow of a man in filthy, ragged robes crouching in the dark to kiss a fox kit on its closed eyes.

Time was strange in the fox-world. Years passed for us, and for Yoshifuji; our son grew rapidly, until he hunted birds with toy arrows and began to ride a fat gold-and-black spotted pony. Years passed, but they were only days in the outer world. My brother, who brought us much of our food, said that my husband's other wife had returned.

"What is she like now?" I asked. I watched my son practice his brush strokes, tilting his head to see the shine of the fresh ink over the matte black of dried ink from earlier lessons; all our magic, and paper was still too scarce to allow a child to destroy more than the absolute minimum number of sheets.

"Sad," Brother said. "What do you expect?"

I shook my head, then remembered he couldn't see me; I was behind my curtain-of-state. As always. "I hoped she would feel better in time."

"How can she?" he said. "It is years you have had Yoshifuji beside you; but out there, he's only been missing for a few days."

I dropped my ball and it rolled across the floor. "How can that be?"

Brother's sigh was impatient. "When were you out last, Sister?"

"I don't know. Before the boy was born, anyway."

"Why not?" He sounded shocked. "Why aren't you going out? Are you sick? I know you were nursing, but the kit's weaned."

"I like to be here when my husband is around."

"We used to play, Sister, just you and me. Remember? We would run in the woods, and at night we'd hunt mice in the formal garden, and play Pounce in the Shadows. What happened to you?"

"Nothing," I said, but I lied when I said this. So much had happened to me, how could I start?

"Then come outside with me. Now." Brother jumped up and knocked the curtain over. I looked up at him, too shocked to hide my face with my sleeve. He caught my hand, and pulled me to my feet. My son looked up at us; I gestured to his nurse, who picked him up and took him from the room.

"Very well," I said. "We'll be foxes together."

This time, crawling out of my woman's form was excruciating, as if it were my own skin I was pulling off. I hunched over until the sense of loss eased, my brother's muzzle pressed against mine. When I felt a little better, I lifted my head and left the space under the storehouse.

It was early evening: the moon was nearly full, and the stars were washed out with its brightness in the east, and the dying colors in the west. We traveled across the formal garden, moving in the trees' short shadows. When I leapt across the stream, beside the half-moon bridge, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the moving water, and it startled me enough that I stumbled when I landed and rolled into a ball.

Brother stopped and nosed at me. "What's wrong?" he whispered, but I shook my head, the gesture coming uneasily to my fox's body. I did not tell him that I had seen a woman in my reflection.

There were already lights in the house: torches set along the verandas, and braziers and lamps in the rooms despite the night's summer heat. Many of the sliding walls were open: I watched moths fly in and die in the house's many flames.

The north suite of rooms, Shikibu's rooms, were dimly lit. I crept up almost to the veranda and looked in. I couldn't see her, but I saw her sleeve, half exposed under her curtain-of-state. A priest knelt in front of the curtain, chanting the sutras. The night's breeze pushed aside one of the curtains; before one of her women could pull it back in place, I saw Shikibu, listless and sad in the gloom.

The house's main rooms were full of light. My husband's other son stood with two older men in traveling clothes. They looked like brothers to Shikibu. They had brought a tree-trunk segment as tall as a man, and they clustered around it, with a Buddhist priest and many servants crowded in the garden watching. Everyone was dressed strangely; in mourning, I realized. It surprised me—no one was dead—until I realized it must be my lord they were mourning. I found that funny, but something hurt quite incredibly in my chest at the thought.

The boy chipped at the trunk with a chisel and mallet.

"What can they be doing?" my brother whispered. "How eccentric humans are."

"I don't like this, whatever it is," I said.

"Hah. Come up closer. Let's see at least what it is they're doing." My brother crawled forward on his belly.

"Brother!" I hissed, but he didn't turn around; so I followed him.

The boy in the hall passed the chisel and mallet to one of Shikibu's brothers.

"Finished, Tadasada?" the man said.

I squinted at the wood: close like this, I could see that it had been carved with an image of some sort, but I couldn't tell what the carving was. The priest stepped forward, with two assistants who threw incense on the braziers in the room. Everyone else in the room lay down on their stomachs and began to pray softly. The priest fell forward and began chanting in a loud voice.

He was praying to the Eleven-Headed Kannon (when I squinted, the carving made sense this time: there was the cluster of heads, and the arms and the crossed legs). When he called this god my fur rose on my shoulders until my skin prickled with the strain. "I hate this," I hissed at my brother; he just nuzzled me and went back to listening.

There was no reason to worry. I remembered the priest who had called on Buddha and walked past us anyway. How could this one fare better? His voice went on and on, asking to know where Yoshifuji's dead body lay. The incense snaked from the braziers and out onto the still air of the garden. One tendril seemed to move toward us, like a smoke-snake questing. The tiniest breeze lifted its tip, so like a snake's head that my courage broke and I bolted, my heart so hot and heavy with panic that I could hardly see the garden I ran through.

I ran under the storehouse and rushed back into my woman's shape and stood there, shivering. "Husband?" I called. "Husband? Where are you?"

I ran through the rooms and hallways, careless of being seen by the men of the household, calling my husband's name. I was on one of the verandas when Yoshifuji emerged quickly from a brightly lit room, dropping the blinds behind him.

"Wife?" he said. His face was wrinkled with a frown. "I have emissaries. We could hear you all over—"

"Husband!" I panted. "I am so sorry—I know this is most unseemly —it's just that—I was so afraid. . . ."

His face softened, and he moved forward quickly to hold me. "What happened? The child? It's all right now, whatever it is, I'm here."

I swallowed, tried to control my breathing. "No, not our son, he's fine." What could I tell him? "A snake of smoke, and it was looking for you. I—must have had a bad dream. I woke up, and I was all alone, and I felt so afraid."

"Alone? Where were your women?"

"They were there. I just meant—lonely for you." I threw myself against him, my arms tight around his neck, and sobbed against his cheek. He

held me and made soothing noises. After a while, he loosened my hands and passed me to one of my women, who stood waiting in the shadows.

"Better?"

I sniffed.

He took my hands. "I'll take care of this little bit of business, and then I'll come and sit with you, all night if you like."

"Yes," I said. "Hurry."

I waited in my rooms. I sat in the near-dark, and tossed my ball, and cried with the horror of that snake of smoke, and longing for Yoshifuji. My son was sleeping, but my nurse carried him in to me, and I watched him, curled up in a nest of quilts. "See, my husband must love me," I said to myself. "Here is the evidence: no Buddha can take this away. No Buddha can threaten his love for me." Then I would think of the snake of smoke and I would jump up and pace and stare out at our pretty fox-gardens again. And Yoshifuji did not come.

But the Eleven-Headed Kannon came. He came as an old man with only one head, and holding a stick; but I knew it was he: he was not made of fox magic, in a place where everything and everyone was. He smelled of the priest's incense. Who else could he be? He walked across the gardens stepping through the carefully placed trees, and our rocks, and the ornamental lake; and he left a path in his wake, like a man raising mud when he fords a stream. The magic tore and shredded where he walked, leaving bare dirt and the shadow of the storehouse overhead. The magic eddied and sealed the break a few steps behind him; but he carried the gash of reality with him, like a Court train.

He walked straight through all our creatings, toward the house.

"No," I shrieked and ran out onto the veranda. "Leave him here!"

The man walked forward. I ran to the room where my husband was, burst in to where he sat with an emissary from the capital and his secretary. "Husband! Run!"

"Wife?—" he said, but I felt the veranda beside me shiver and dissolve. I fell to my knees. Yoshifuji jumped up, his sword sheath in his hands. I clawed at the Kannon's robe as he passed me, locked my hands in his sword belt, until he was pulling me forward with him. He did not even slow.

"What are you—" my husband bellowed, as the man prodded him with the stick in his hand. Yoshifuji jumped backward, and pulled his sword free.

I screamed. The sword shivered into a handful of dirty straw. My husband looked at it in disgust and threw it on the ground. The man prodded him again, and Yoshifuji moved backward, through the house.

"Leave him, please leave him, they mean nothing to him, I love him—"

I begged and prayed as the man dragged me through our house, out into the gardens. My hands bled from the hard edge of the belt. If nothing else around us was real, I knew this was, this hot blood in my palms. Yoshifuji kept turning back, trying to help me; but the man just jabbed at him again, and forced him stumbling forward.

The belt leather was slick with blood; my fingers slipped and I fell behind the man, in the dirt below the storehouse, beside one of the support posts. The Kannon gave my husband one more jab, and he crawled out from our home, and stood upright in his kitchen garden. I crawled after him, but I knew it was too late already. I lay by the storehouse in my robes, blood on my hands, my long hair trailing on the ground.

It was still dusk there; the thirteenth evening after Yoshifuji had come to me; his thirteenth year in my fox-world. Nearly everyone was in the garden, huddled in little clumps and talking among themselves. Yoshifuji was two things in my eyes, like something seen and distorted through water: handsome in his dress robes, a little dusty now, still carrying an empty sword sheath; and covered with filth, casual robes stained and torn, holding a little wormeaten stick: a man who had lived in the dirt with foxes.

The boy was the first to see my husband looking around him.

"Father!" he shouted, and ran to Yoshifuji. "Is this you?"

"Son?" my husband said hesitantly. "Tadasada?" I saw memory coming back to him; but the fox magic was strong enough to shape his understanding of things. "How have you not grown more while I was gone?"

The boy threw his arms around the man. "Oh, Father, what has happened to you? You look so old!"

Yoshifuji pushed the boy away. "It doesn't matter; I am only here to send your mother back to her family. She is back, I presume? I was so desperate after your mother left to visit her relatives, and she was gone for so long. But I met someone, a wonderful woman, and married her, and we have had a lovely little boy. He's growing much handsomer than you, I must admit. He's my heir, you know. You're no longer my first son, Tadasada: I love his mother so."

The boy looked up at a darkened room of the house. I saw a form there, robes shifting softly, and I realized it was Shikibu, watching, too aware of the proprieties to come down to greet her husband in front of so many people. The boy straightened. "Where is this son of yours?"

"Why, over there," my husband said, pointing at the storehouse.

They saw me then. "A fox!" one man shouted, and they all took up the cry: "A fox! A fox!" Men ran toward me and the storehouse, carrying sticks and torches.

"Husband!" I screamed. "Stop them!"

He hesitated, obviously confused. "Wife?" he asked unsteadily.

"A fox!" the people yelled.

"Please stay with me!" I cried, and held out my arms to him. He stepped toward me; the boy threw himself into Yoshifuji's arms, overbalancing him.

I looked up at the house again, in the instant before the men caught up to me, and, for the first time, I saw her face clearly, where she stood on the veranda. I saw tears on her face, and I knew that she, alone of everyone here (save my lord) saw me for a woman.

They chased us, the men. They stuck their torches down so they could see under the storehouse floor, and poked around with their sticks, and my family fled in all directions: even my son, who was only half-grown. They followed me until I threw off even the seeming of my woman's body in blind panic. The pain drove me out of consciousness, but my fox's body ran anyway, on its bloody pads.

I came back to my woman's shape much later, when I was sick from the fear that had choked me. My house was empty, save for the servants, who brought me clean robes and food.

I have waited since then. My family has not returned. My grandfather was old; I don't know if he could have lived through the heart-bursting panic of the chase. My mother, my brother, and my son are all gone. I hope they are together, but I fear they are scattered.

Yoshifuji wept for many days; I heard him, when I crawled through the darkness to his door, calling my name and the name of our son. The household summoned priests and a yin-yang diviner to purge my husband of his "enchantment," but they say its hold has been strong. Recently, I heard him say that he is over his sickness, but I don't know what to believe; it didn't seem like a sickness to me, and he does not sound over it.

Without my family, it's hard to maintain the house and the servants. The garden is already gone, faded like mist. The house dissolves room by room; I don't leave my wing much, not wanting to know how far it has gone, this melting of my home. My servants are fewer now, and they are even more silent than they were before. I have thought of leaving, stripping off the humanness one more time and running in the woods again; but I know I can't. I am no longer simply a fox.

But I am not simply a woman, either. I know it is a woman's role to wait, always lost in the shadows, patient for her lord. I know the old tales would have me wait until my death, after such a thing as this. But I have waited so long already, alone, tossing my ball, puzzling over Yoshifuji's diary. I am so tired of this.

I have a plan, if a simple one. It was summer, the thirteen days he

spent with me. Now it is winter: the first snow has fallen today, a cold cloud as deep as my wooden clogs. I know him so well; he will come out into the garden tonight, to write about the snow and the moon. And I will roll my white ball across his path. If he still misses me, he will see it for what it is, and find me, and we will be happy: no false lives this time, no waiting in the darkness, no magic but that which will keep us either human or fox together, according to our choice. And if he truly is content there, with Shikibu and the boy, it will only seem another piece of the snow.

I think he will see the ball.

I have just thought of something:

Fox magic:

Priests, you can cure him of everything
but love.

I think this is a poem. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We close out the year next month with a jam-packed Mid-December issue that features both established authors and a slew of Rising New Stars:

Veteran Welsh author **David Redd** makes a powerful *Asimov's* debut with the chilling, suspenseful, and strangely evocative story of "The Old Man of Munington"; critically acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford** returns with a wry, caustic look at "The Cure for Love"; new writer **Kathleen Ann Goonan** gives us a compassionate look at a ruined life as seen through a "Shark Eye"; the hard-hitting **Melanie Tem** returns with one of the most frightening stories you're ever likely to read, as she introduces us to "Jenny"; **S.P. Somtow** returns to take us to the slums of Los Angeles for the poignant story of a boy's curious apotheosis in "Tagging the Moon"; popular new writer **Jonathan Lethem** takes us to a high-tech future for the bittersweet story of what it's like to be one of "The Precocious Objects"; Canadian author **Andrew Weiner** returns after a long absence with a compelling study of alien visitors to Earth and the enigmas that wait for all of us "In Dreams"; new writer **Sonia Orin Lyris** spins a razor-edged little tale that proves once again that for every thing "There is a Season"; and new writer **William Shockley** gives us a ringside seat for a bizarre battle of wits between a troubled scientist and an "Old Antagonist" who's very old and very wily indeed. All this, plus an array of columns and features.

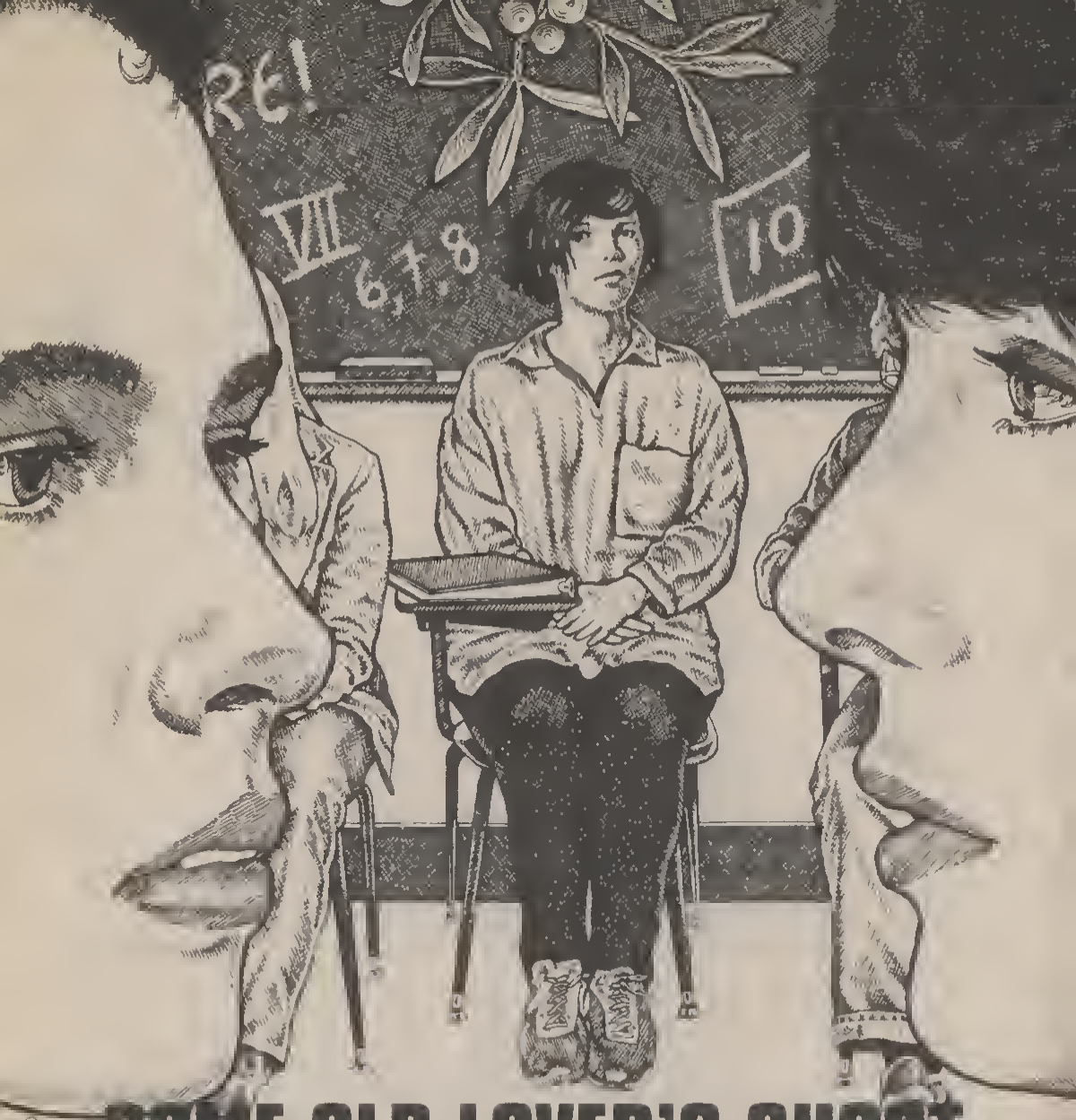
Look for our Mid-December issue on sale on your newsstands on November 9, 1993, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great issues we have coming up for you next year!



if you loved me

If you loved me
you would bring me a kilofon of semi-sweef chocolafe
compressed to neutron degeneracy
If you loved me
you'd do genetic engineering
on my former boyfriend and his wife
transforming them into naked mole rats
if you loved me
you would go skinnydipping in heavy water
letting me ride your shoulders
so I wouldn't get wet
buf you don't love me
because *if* you loved me
you'd rearrange the asteroid belt in the shape of a huge heart
with my inifials on the buckle
you'd win the Nobel Prize and give if fo me
for my book on gerbil telepathy
and not mind when people said
that you were an idiot for love
buf if's real obvious you don't love me or
you'd build a time machine
and we would travel to the beginning of time
so you could bang me
at the momenf of fhe big bang
If you really loved me
you'd rocket to Venus and jump off the love-planet
and plummef fo your death in my back yard
If you loved me
you'd die
you'd jusf die.

—Mary A. Turzillo



SOME OLD LOVER'S GHOST

Ian McDowell

The author of our second seasonal story returns to our pages on the tenth anniversary of his first appearance in *Asimov's* (with "Sons of the Morning," December 1983). Mr. McDowell has an MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His fiction has also been published in *Amazing, F&SF, The Year's Best Horror Stories, Borderlands II,* and other anthologies.

art: Ron Chironna

I long to talk with some old lover's ghost,
Who died before the god of love was born.

John Donne

The only way I know to tell this story is to just write what happened. If it was something I'd made up, I could play around with it, give it a neat narrative hook, start in the middle of things and be off and running. But it's true, and I want it to stay that way, so I'm beginning flat and plain.

It happened in 1985, when I was earning my Master's in English from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Since I already had one Master's—an MFA in Creative Writing—they offered me a teaching assistantship, just like the Ph.D. candidates get. Needless to say, I took it; seven thousand dollars a semester wasn't much, but it helped.

Lots of graduate assistants hate the actual teaching; they're just into research, or finishing up their dissertations, and will tell you as much. For them, teaching a class full of glassy-eyed freshmen is drudge work to pay rent, like waiting tables is for a struggling actor.

It wasn't like that for me. I liked teaching, even if it *was* dreary at times, slogging through piles of essays on why the drinking age shouldn't be raised to twenty-one (a big issue that year). I'd learned one trick to make it easier, or at least more rewarding. Whenever the schedule of classes I was taking permitted, I signed up to teach at night.

That way, I got a higher percentage of N.T.A.'s—Non-Traditional Adults—that is, older students. It was sort of daunting when I started out, teaching people sometimes twice my age, but they were much more committed to learning than the average undergraduate; after all, they were there because they wanted to be, not because Mommy and Daddy were footing the bill. Having even one of them in your section could change the attitude of the entire class, and I usually had three or four, out of a class of twenty-five.

Anyway, in August of 1985 I was teaching English 101 each Tuesday and Thursday night at seven. Right before the first class of the semester, I stopped by the office of one of my professors, Dr. Suzanne Radcliffe. Dr. Radcliffe—she wasn't the type you addressed as Suzanne, even at departmental meetings, where we were ostensibly peers—was a tall woman in her mid-forties, with short greying hair, prominent cheekbones, and striking dark eyes. Rather attractive, in a sort of severe, weathered way. She had always intimidated me, but I liked her.

When I knocked on her half-open door, she looked up from the stack of books on her desk. "Hello, Ian." God, she had a deep voice.

"Hi. Is your Romantic Lit class closed?"

She held up a roll sheet, which looked very full. "Theoretically. Did you want to add it?"

"Yes, if I might."

"All right, if you do me one favor."

That was a surprise; I'd expected her to refuse. "Anything." I desperately needed the class that semester, as it was the only one that would fit my schedule.

"Are you going by the library?"

As a matter of fact, my Freshman Comp class was being held in the Seminar Room on the seventh floor, space being in short supply due to renovations in McIver building. I told her as much.

She laughed, albeit rather sourly. "Yes, that's my fault. I was supposed to teach there this semester, but I wouldn't do it. I told them to give the room to one of the composition people."

Bitch, I thought, but I smiled anyway. "One of the advantages of tenure, I guess. You can make sure you get classes right across the hall from your office."

She stopped smiling. "It's not that. I just don't like that room. Or that floor. But if you're teaching there tonight, the class will be starting shortly, won't it? Let me sign your add slip and give you this stack of books. Just drop them off at the circulation desk."

Unfortunately, there proved to be a line, and it was after seven by the time I got up to the counter. It's not good for the instructor to come to class late, at least not on the first night. I handed the books to a gangly Pakistani and started to sprint towards the elevator.

"Wait," he yelled after me. "This one isn't ours." He was holding a slim little hardback.

I came back and examined it. He was right—it still had a dust cover, and there was no call number on the spine. She must have given this one to me by mistake. So I took it with me.

The seventh floor was typically empty—I didn't know what books were shelved there (English and American Literature were on the second floor), but I'd taken my Research Methods and Bibliography class in the seminar room two semesters previously, and had never noticed anyone at the tables or carrels. Actually, that was good—it meant I wouldn't have to keep the door shut all the time.

Nobody was in the seminar room yet, either, even though it was now seven minutes after the hour. I should have expected as much. Freshmen have enough trouble finding their way around the regular classroom buildings for the first few weeks, and a lot of them wouldn't realize that the JKS on their computer print-out class schedules meant Jackson Library. Better just have a seat and wait.

I took a second look at Dr. Radcliffe's book. The title was intriguing:

The dust jacket was yellowed and brittle; I hoped this wasn't a valuable edition that she'd accidentally given me. Inside, there was a faded inscription, *For Suzanne, with all my love,* then a name I couldn't make out, and a date. *Christmas, 1965.*

Feeling like I was prying, I thumbed it till I got to a makeshift book mark, a post-it note on which was inscribed "Photocopy for class handout, October 10th."

Here was something I recognized from my seventh grade literature textbook, one of the Child Ballads, "The Unquiet Grave." Softly, I read aloud the lines I'd always liked

The wind doth blow today, My Love,
And a few small drops of rain.
I never had but one true love;
In cold grave she has lain.

I looked up. Someone had just come in the door. A short, slim girl with dark, bobbed hair, wearing a paint-splattered grey smock and black stirrup pants. "Hi," I said, embarrassed that she might have heard me reading aloud. "Have a seat. We'll make introductions once everyone is here."

She just stood there. "You are in my class, aren't you?"

She wasn't carrying the text, or even a notebook. Several other people appeared in the doorway. The dark-haired girl nodded shyly and took a seat in the back of the room.

Once it looked like everyone who was coming was there, I started to read the roll. "If your name isn't on this, talk to me after class."

There were twenty-four names on the roll, and nineteen of them were present. Three more weren't on the roll. One of them was the dark-haired girl in the back; the other two, male and female preppy types, sat up front, clutching add slips.

I introduced myself, gave them my usual spiel about how they should call me Ian, not Mr. McDowell, and not Dr. McDowell under any circumstances ("real professors get mad").

There were three N.T.A.'s in the class: Harvey, a middle-aged salesman with a Bronx accent; Janice, a pleasantly plump housewife, and Terri, a dental hygienist. As usual, they led the class discussion, but pretty soon everyone had loosened up.

Except the dark-haired girl. She never said a word. Never took any notes, either, but I didn't care about that.

"Okay, for Thursday I want a short essay on what you think students should get out of an English Composition class. Use specifics and direct examples. And for God's sake, forget what your high school teachers may have told you about using long sentences and avoiding the first person. Short, declarative sentences are fine. And since you'll be dealing in your own opinions, the first person is the expected voice. Got that?"

They did. Class was over. The couple with add slips came up for my signature. "Wait a second," I said to the dark-haired girl, who was heading for the door.

She paused. I signed the add slips and wished the preppy couple a good night. The dark-haired girl just stood there.

I got up and approached her. She had a sharp nose and chin, and big green eyes, the latter somewhat red-streaked, as though she'd recently been crying. Although superficially similar to the haircuts that were starting to come into style, her bob had a teased flip, like something out of the sixties. Even with the teased hair, she was very pretty.

"Don't you have an add slip for me to sign?"

"I'm not adding your class. I just wanted to sit in."

Her voice was husky, with a Southern accent more like the ones you hear in the movies than the ones usually spoken in North Carolina.

"Just sitting in? Why?"

"Well, I've been out of school for a while. . . ."

She didn't look old enough. "Are you an N.T.A.?"

"I don't know. What's that?"

"A Non-Traditional Adult."

She laughed, not a giggle, thank God, but a throaty chuckle. "Yes, I think I am."

"Good," I replied. "So am I. What's your name?" Shit, that sounded like a come-on. The last thing I wanted to do was be perceived as the kind of jerk who makes passes at his students. Except that she wasn't one of my students, apparently.

"My name's Megan," she answered after a rather long pause. "I work here in the library, and I was wondering if you'd mind if I sat in on your class from time to time."

"Not at all, but I don't want to get you in trouble. I mean, you shouldn't be sitting in my class when you're supposed to be shelving stuff, or whatever."

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm not working now."

"Good. Would you like to get a beer, or a cup of coffee?"

She looked down at her feet. "I can't leave right now."

"But you said you weren't working."

She shook her head. "Yeah, but I've got some things I have to look up."

I almost offered to help her, though she probably knew more about the library than I did, if she worked here. Anyway, she was already gone.

I gathered my stuff together and put it in my briefcase, sighing. Being only a few years older than most of my students sometimes made me feel awkward.

There was no sign of Megan out in the quiet stacks, even though I hadn't heard the elevator. Maybe she was hiding in the bathroom. Great; she probably *had* thought I was coming on too strong.

The next day was Dr. Radcliffe's Romantic Literature class. Afterward, I gave her back her copy of *Ballads of Dead Ladies*.

"Oh, did I give you that?" There was a faint catch in her voice.

"Yes. I noticed you marked 'The Unquiet Grave.' I always liked that one."

She put the book into her briefcase. "Good. I'll be copying it for a handout when we talk about the Demon Lover tradition."

That sounded interesting. I didn't ask her who gave her the book.

Megan wasn't at my next class, or the one after, or the one after that, but two weeks later, there she was again in the back of the room, still looking like she'd recently been crying, and still wearing the same grey smock and black stretchy pants. Unlike her hair, the clothes were a style that was starting to come into vogue. I'd just graded everyone's first major paper, and they all wanted to talk to me after class, so I didn't get a chance to speak to her. She didn't show up again until right before Thanksgiving.

Before that, Halloween came and went. The school paper, *The Carolinian,* did their usual story about campus ghosts. It mentioned that the seventh floor of Jackson Library was supposedly haunted by Mary, a girl who'd hanged herself there in the mid-sixties. It referred to the Seventh Floor as the Law and Legal Studies floor, which was something I'd never known, and which explained why it was always so deserted (we didn't have a real Law School like Duke, just a few classes taught out of the Poli-Sci department). Why would anybody want to hang themselves on the Law and Legal Studies floor?

It certainly didn't seem like a likely place for haunting, with its bright yellow paint, spacious metal stacks and sterile fluorescent lights. The Graduate Library at Chapel Hill, now there was a place you might meet a ghost, down there in the catacomb labyrinth of cramped, dark musty corridors. If this was fiction, and not something that really happened, I'd set it at Carolina, not UNCG.

Like I said, Megan sat in on my class again the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. She looked just the same—the same hairstyle, the same smock, the same splatters of paint (mostly green and yellow, with some orange). Well, maybe that's what constituted her work clothes. What did she do,

shelve books? I'd never seen her at work. I'd never seen her anywhere, except in my class.

If I was a character in a story, you might think me dense for not beginning to figure things out. But this isn't a story, and in life we don't expect signs and portents.

I gave my final assignment. It was what Walter Beale, who was both Head of the Composition Program and the primary author of the English 101 textbook, liked to call reflective/exploratory writing.

"Here's one possibility," I said. "Think about something that hurt or embarrassed you, something that still feels unresolved. Write about what happened, in plain language that concentrates on the externals. Then talk about how you felt then. Then about how you feel now. Are they the same? If they're different, why do you think that is?"

Of course, a disclaimer was necessary. "Look, I'm not demanding your most intimate confessions here. Remember, I'm just a graduate English major, not your psychiatrist. But try to deal with something that really matters to you, something that mattered then, and still matters now."

Naturally, they had a lot of questions about that, even after the time was up. Megan slipped out the door while they were still talking to me. I never saw her again after that.

Papers were due on the last day before exams began, and for once, not one of them was late. There was already a stack on my desk when I entered the room, and everyone else handed theirs in by the end of class. It looked like I might get my grading done early this time.

At home that night, I rifled through the papers while a women's prison movie starring Sybil Danning played on HBO. I'd insisted that the final essay had to be typed or done on a computer ("and for God's sake, separate the sheets and remove the perforations!"). Somebody apparently hadn't heard me.

Not only was the damn thing written in pencil, but it had been scribbled on the backs of some sort of computer printout sheet that appeared to have been torn out of a bound volume. One side of each page listed legal journals, from the *American Bar Review* to the *Duke Law Quarterly,* while the other contained crabbed and not terribly legible handwriting. It looked like it had been written using one of the blunt little Number 2 pencils kept in a box beside the Serials Printout on each floor. That was likely, as the paper had been obviously torn out of the volume on the Seventh Floor.

I wasn't going to bother to read this crap; somebody had just earned an automatic "F." I checked the upper right hand corner for a name.

There it was, though it was hard to read. Megan Campbell. That name wasn't on my roll. Megan?

Well, at least I didn't have to worry about anybody filing a formal

protest about a failing grade. But why had Megan bothered to do this? What the hell; I might as well read the thing.

It took me a while to puzzle out her handwriting. Here's how it went.

I did something really bad once. Or maybe it wasn't so bad. All I know is, it hurt someone I loved. I think that's bad. I think something that hurts someone is the only kind of bad there is.

She and I were roommates. She was beautiful, and really smart. She was the editor of *Coraddi,* the school art and literature magazine, a senior and an honor student, while I was just a lowly little freshman Art major without much talent.

She liked my stuff, though, and printed some of my drawings in *Coraddi.* We were close friends after that. We both liked folk music, and would sit in the parlor and watch "Hootenanny" on the old TV set, or she'd get out her guitar and play and sing. She'd grown up in the mountains, and loved the old songs, about sadness and dead lovers and all that. You should have heard her sing "Barbara Allen." I couldn't decide if she was really going to be an English professor, or the next Joan Baez.

That last Christmas, she was supposed to stay with me and my family in Winston. We sat up Christmas Eve drinking eggnog, which we'd made stronger after my parents went to bed.

I'd known for a while that I liked girls. I'd tried it with boys, but it never worked. She didn't know. Almost nobody did. But I knew.

There were Christmas decorations up, and holly and mistletoe. "Look at that," she said. "Your brother won't be home until tomorrow. There's nobody to kiss."

So I kissed her.

She kissed back, at first, but then I got bold, and tried to stick my tongue in her mouth, and that spooked her. She pushed me away, and the punch bowl got knocked over, and then she was running out of the house, out to her car. I ran after her.

She was pulling out of the driveway. I ran back for Dad's keys on the kitchen table and followed. I caught up to her outside of Greensboro, and stayed right behind her.

She drove to the campus and pulled up in front of the library. It was all dark and locked up, of course, but she'd been working in the rare book room that semester, and had a key. She ran in before I was out of the car, but she'd left the door unlocked behind her.

I found her at the circulation desk, calling her dad on the phone. I guess she'd come there because she didn't have a quarter, and this was the only phone she knew she could use.

"Stay away from me," she yelled. She told her dad she was coming

home and hung up. "Stay away, or I'll tell the Dean. I'll tell your parents." Then she ran out, leaving me alone in the library. I wanted to kill myself.

I never saw her after that.

How do I feel about it now? I don't know. Things are strange now; they don't seem to change much. I no longer want to kill myself, though.

I can't think of anything else to say.

Jesus Christ. It was an effective piece of writing, but I didn't know what to think about it. It was late and I was tired. "Hootenanny"? When was there a show on TV called "Hootenanny"?

I woke up the next morning with a forty-eight-hour bug, and the next days were blurred. I didn't get my grades finished on time, but I got them finished.

I planned to go spend the holiday with my father in Fayetteville. We sometimes didn't get along, but my girlfriend and I had broken up that fall, and there was nowhere else to go. Since I'd gotten behind in everything, I found myself still in town on Christmas Eve.

I'd left a present for Dad behind in my office (cubicle was a better term), so I stopped by the English Department just after sunset. I took my class's final papers with me, intending to put them in a manilla envelope taped to my door, so my students could pick them up after Christmas. When I did that, I realized that Megan's essay, if that's what it was, was still among them. Tucking it under my arm, I decided to stop by Dr. Radcliffe's office, to see if she'd posted the final grades for her Romantic Lit class on her door.

She was there, typing away on her computer. Somehow, it didn't surprise me that she was working on Christmas Eve.

"Sorry my final paper was so badly typed," I said. "My Smith-Corona broke, and I had to use one I rented from the bookstore. It didn't have a correcting feature."

"At least you used a new ribbon," she said. "I've seen worse."

I laughed. "Yeah, look what got handed in in my Freshman Comp class."

I don't know why I did that, making light of Megan's essay that way. Maybe because it had disturbed me, and this was a way of distancing myself.

I hadn't really meant to hand it to Dr. Radcliffe, but she took it from me. "Oh, my, I hope you failed whomever wrote this."

"Actually, she's not a student."

I was going to explain, but the expression on Dr. Radcliffe's face brought me up short. She was staring at the name on the essay; she looked like she'd been punched.

"Ian, what kind of sick joke is this?"

I still didn't have a clue, although you probably do. "I'm sorry?"

She stood up and grabbed my forearm. Damn, she had a strong grip. "Who wrote this?"

I told her.

She stood there and listened, her pallor visible in the dimly lit hall. When I was done, she practically staggered back into her chair and slumped there, her face in her hands.

"Are you all right?" I didn't know what else to say.

At length, she looked up at me. "Is College Hill open?" She was referring to a popular bar.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Let's go have a beer."

I told her I'd been planning to drive to Fayetteville that night.

"Do you want to pass my class?"

I did, and I was curious. We went to College Hill.

It was a cozy beer bar with a nice jukebox. Over a couple of Pilsners, she made me tell the whole story again, in great detail.

"All right," I said finally, my patience wearing thin. "What the hell is all this about?"

She traced the initials carved into the wooden table with a long forefinger. "Megan Campbell jumped off the seventh floor of the library on Christmas Eve of 1965. It seems as though her ghost has been sitting in on your class."

The only thing I could think to say was really stupid. "I thought the ghost on the seventh floor was a girl named Mary who hanged herself. That's what the paper said."

She snorted. "When I was a student here, we believed Mary haunted Aycock Auditorium. Almost every campus in North Carolina has a ghost named Mary who hanged herself. Stories get mixed up."

"Why the seventh floor? The ninth is the tallest." It was a tasteless thing to ask, but I was feeling a bit loopy.

"The library tower had just been added then. The floors above the seventh weren't open yet."

Now for the really dumb question. "How do you know all this?"

She met my eyes, I thought she must have been really beautiful when she was younger. "Because I was the girl Megan kissed. The one who rejected her."

Oh.

She looked at her beer for a long time. "I didn't admit I was bisexual for a long time, not until I was at Duke, earning my Ph.D."

"Bisexual" was a surprise. The word in the department was that she was a pretty hard-line Lesbian. "The Dyke" was what graduate students who didn't like her called her.

She hadn't stopped speaking. "You've got to understand, for all the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties, it was still a pretty homophobic time. Nobody was talking about gay rights or identity. And 1965 was really the tail end of the 'fifties, anyway."

I killed my beer. "I'm sorry. I mean, that doesn't help, but I don't know what to say."

She stood up. "Neither do I, but I know who I need to say it to."

"Where are you going?" I already knew.

"To the library."

I watched her leave without saying anything else.

If this was a story, I would add a couple of paragraphs here of my narrator's reaction. I'd probably have him profoundly shaken by this violation of his rationalistic worldview, this assault on all his preconceptions about How Things Really Work. In his excellent book on the Victorian and Edwardian ghost story, *Elegant Nightmares*, Jack Sullivan observes that ghosts only became really frightening with the rise of rationalism. They only truly terrified us once we no longer believed in them.

I'd never believed in ghosts before. Now, perhaps, I was prepared to believe in at least one. How did that make me feel?

I didn't know. I still don't. Mostly, I try not to think about it. That's certainly what I did at the time.

Instead, I thought about going home, but decided I needed another drink first. I wasn't about to try driving to Fayetteville tonight, and there was nothing waiting for me back at my apartment. The "another drink" turned into four, and I took my time killing each longneck.

I was sort of slumped in the corner, listening to Nina Simone on the jukebox, when Dr. Radcliffe came back. Her face was still pale, but more composed.

"I thought you might still be here."

I lit her cigarette. "Where'd you go?"

"The seventh floor."

But the library was closed. I said as much.

"I called the Vice-Chancellor, and he called campus security. They let me in and waited for me downstairs. God knows what they thought, but I don't care. One of the advantages of tenure, you once said."

It wasn't my business, of course, but I think she wanted to tell me. "What happened?"

She motioned for the bartender to bring her a beer. "I got off the elevator and there she was. Waiting for me. Still eighteen, wearing that paint-splattered blouse she loved so much. So young. Not like me. So young."

I wasn't sure she was going to continue, but then she did.

"I told her I was sorry. I told her I was wrong. I told her what I was. I asked her to forgive me for what I did."

"Did she?"

"She wanted me to forgive her. So we forgave each other. Just like we were both alive."

Was that a tear on her cheek?

"We hugged each other, and she felt warm and solid and real. Then we kissed."

She sat there, her eyes fixed on something else, running her finger around the rim of her bottle.

"And?"

It was definitely a tear.

"In the old ballads, if you kiss your dead lover, that's usually it; one touch of those 'clay-cold lips,' and you die, too. Maybe that's what I expected to happen. Maybe I wouldn't have minded."

"But her lips weren't cold, and I didn't die. So I put my tongue in her mouth. For a moment, it was like kissing anyone that way. My eyes were shut. Her mouth was warm and wet. Then, just for an instant, it wasn't. I tasted, I don't know, dust, crumbled dead leaves, cold dry emptiness. Then nothing. When I opened my eyes, I was hugging myself in an empty room."

I stared at the revolving CD's atop the jukebox while she wiped her eye.

"I guess she's free now. Maybe I am too." She stood up. "I better be getting home. My cats haven't been fed."

"Merry Christmas," said someone at the bar to somebody else. I looked at the clock. It was midnight.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Radcliffe," I said, somewhat inanely.

"Merry Christmas, Ian," she replied hoarsely. She didn't invite me to call her Suzanne.

She paid and left. I sat at the booth and killed my last beer.

"To dead loves," I said, to no one in particular. ●

—for Lee, who wanted a Christmas ghost story, Anne, who cheered me on, and Jill, who put it in Morpheus's library. Sisters of Mercy, indeed.

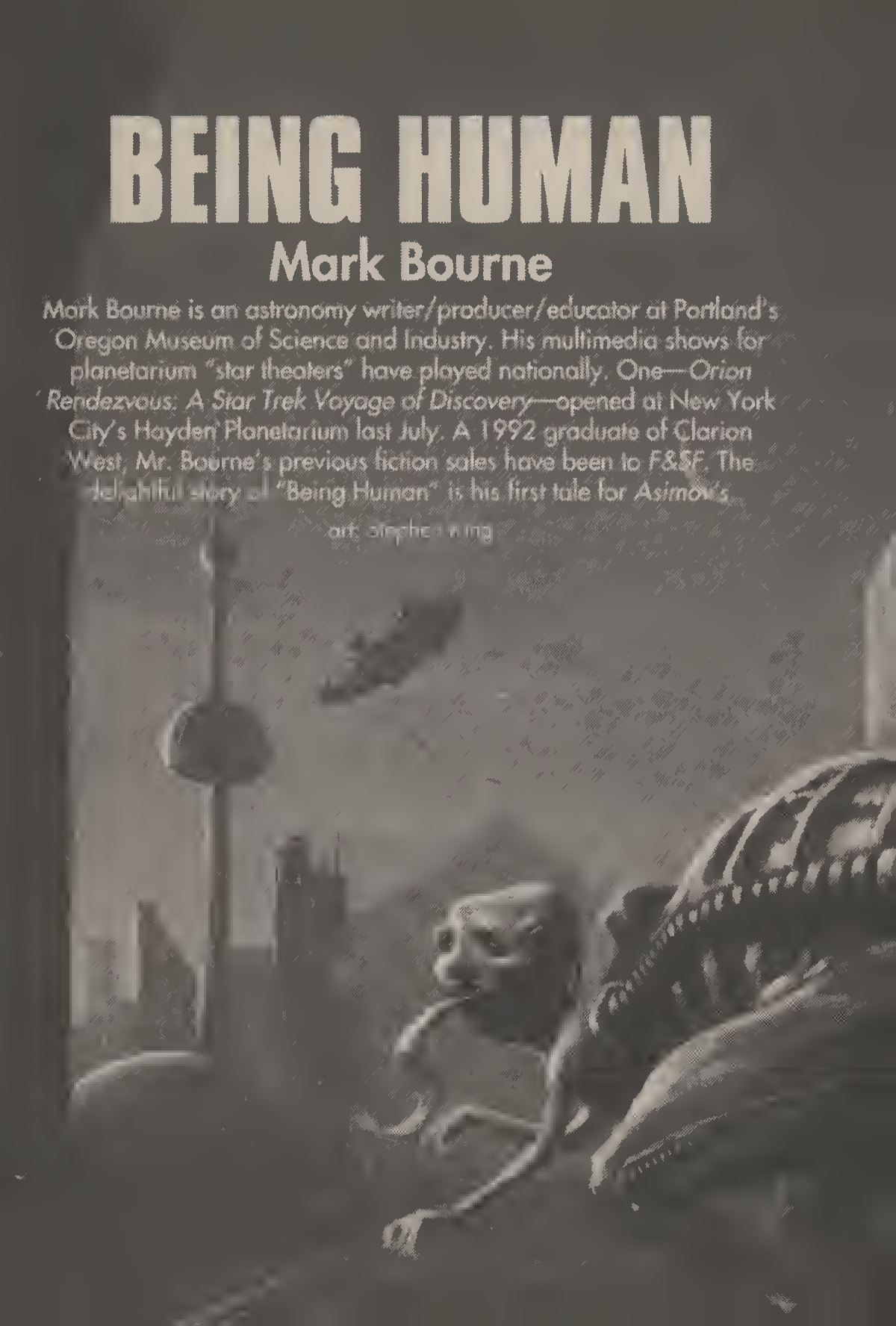


BEING HUMAN

Mark Bourne

Mark Bourne is an astronomy writer/producer/educator at Portland's Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. His multimedia shows for planetarium "star theaters" have played nationally. One—*Orion Rendezvous: A Star Trek Voyage of Discovery*—opened at New York City's Hayden Planetarium last July. A 1992 graduate of Clarion West, Mr. Bourne's previous fiction sales have been to *F&SF*. The delightful story of "Being Human" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

art: stephen king



"Vroom vroom!" Tan shouted. Her vast cigar-shaped body floated overhead on a cool Puget Sound breeze. I reeled in my tongue from off the street, reared up on my back peds, and looked upward. She wiggled her tail rudder in that way she does when she's playing at being sexy.

"Johann, lookit me!" she called down, giggling.

She sucked in her dorsal fins and inhaled so deeply that her huge cheeks bulged like . . . well, like balloons. Holding her breath, she smiled at me with a tight-lipped crease that stretched from ear to ear (that is, port to starboard). Now fully swollen with air, she paused to let her nannies do their work inside her whale-sized stomach. She winked a sky-blue eye as big around as my entire body, then with a long fart that sounded like a chorus of coughing tubas, rocketed up and away over the Seattle sunset toward the Mt. Rainier Festival. Her exuberant "Wheeeee!" followed her into the distance.

A passing bus looked annoyed, crinkled its nose at Tan's perfumed exhaust, and increased its stride down the boulevard, as if ushering its passengers away from the local riffraff. Snob. Soon, Tan was lost among other bobbing gnats near the mountaintop.

She'd grown up so fast. I couldn't help but smile, then resumed licking the curb, savoring the fruity tang of the dust and dirt before letting my nannies digest them. Kids these days!

Tan was in better spirits since her morph. Higher spirits, I should say. Her new bioform suited her buoyant personality. But two centuries of nanotech and designer genes hadn't changed everything. Soon she'd be brooding over how broad her dirigible waistline looked or whether some cute boy, girl, or neut would ask her out on a date. She'd already come to me for "adult advice." (Her parents had set out for the Oort Cloud farms before Tan was born. I heard they were doing well; still, they *should* have been here for their child's first morph. But whenever I told her so, Tan just laughed and called me "oldtimer.") I recalled my own adolescence with a wispy mix of nostalgia and loathing. It happened before my morph, back in my clunky old birthbody. Like Tan, I had been an idealistic, dreamy-eyed kid with stars in my eyes. I guess it's just all part of being human.

I lapped up a pile of wind-strewn leaves cluttering the curb. Old leaves, gone toward a licorice flavor. I chewed slowly. And thought. I liked to think while I worked. Would I miss Tan's long, black ponytail? Or the feel of her palm on my back when she squatted next to me during our long talks about life and growing up and what her first morph should be? Were we drifting apart?

I sighed and swallowed, sniffed around for anything that needed cleaning. There was mildew growing on the oldtime building across the street. Taxis and transports and servicers stepped over me as I trundled to the

brick structure and performed the task that best suited me, right down to my genes. Banana. All mildew tastes like banana. Always. This part of Seattle was still the cleanest in town after—hoo!—my almost thirty years on the job. But where was that old satisfaction in a job well done? Why did the streets and buildings and sidewalks all look and taste the same to me now?

I gazed up at the glittery-gold, snowy peak of Rainier. Which of those flitting specks was Tan, drifting freely among her friends at the Festival? Would she pursue her dreams, whatever they might be? Or would she wake up one day, years from now, to realize that she had filed them away somewhere and never bothered to look at them again? A hollow cave of regret opened inside me—a wide, empty place that even the nannies couldn't convert to something useful or ornamental.

I shat a pile of uncut diamonds into a collector, then trudged homeward, watching the sidewalk pass between my peds. For the first time since my long-gone youth, I ignored the now-and-then nourishment littering my path.

"Howyadoin', Johann, you ol' scumsucker?" said House, sphinctering the door open and turning on the porch light.

"Fine, you thin-skinned shack of shit."

It was an old game. He could tell my mood was glum, and I inwardly thanked him for trying to cheer me up.

"Any messages?" I asked. Not today, I thought.

"Not today," he said.

In the main chamber, he grew my favorite overstuffed chair from the floor so I could sit and put my peds up for a while. I climbed into it and listened to the soothing br*rum* br*rum* of House's heartbeat. His pulse throbbed warmly around my body. I closed my eyes and gently stroked the arm of the chair. He responded with massaging rhythms along my spine. It felt good.

When I opened my eyes, he had opened a big, brown pair of his own near the holoprint on the wall (a portrait of me before my morph. Red hair, toothy smile, astride my father's shoulders. My father never morphed, and never understood my choice of vocations. He died before he saw how my talents made this city shine. Perhaps he would have become proud of me. Like I said—nostalgia.) The eyes blinked once and focused on me. "How was your day?"

"Fine. The usual."

"Did you see Tan?"

"Briefly. She didn't have time to talk." The place seemed so empty these days. But, of course, I could never tell House that. "She looks good."

"That's good. I miss her." House always liked Tan. "It was fun having

a kid around when she was here. I still have the playroom. Remember when she used to tickle me by drawing on the walls?" He chuckled. "But then she found new friends who aren't as dull as us—"

"We all grow up sooner or later." I didn't like the surly timbre of my voice. There was an uncomfortable pause while I tried to think of something to change the subject.

House beat me to it. "So. What's the problem?" he said.

"Eat shit."

"Not my job, I'm afraid." He extended a soft, pink nipple from the ceiling and dangled it in front of my face. I turned away from it, knowing how much he hated rejection.

"Please tell me," he said, masking the hurt poorly. "You've been so distant lately. For weeks. We don't talk anymore. I've never seen you this low before, not in all the years we've been together." His eyes turned toward the floor, and the wall wrinkled with deep frown lines. "I'm worried about you."

Dammit. His pouting always worked on me. I softly scratched the chair.

"It's nothing," I lied. Oh, what's the use? "Just feeling old, I guess."

The wall got smooth and the eyes doubled their diameters. Twin eyebrows formed as upraised arches.

"Old? You were juved just two years ago! Your deenay is wound tight as ever. And your nannies are guaranteed for the duration of this lifetime." If I hadn't known better I'd say he sounded patronizing. "Johann, my sweet, silly love, you've got at least a hundred years left on that dirtbag body you're wearing."

A hundred years. As my unmorphed, long-dead father used to say—shoot.

We both breathed silently for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was a plaintive whisper. "Are you tired of me?"

Shit. I didn't want it this way. I wasn't prepared for it. I didn't know what I wanted. Only that it was something else. The chair hugged me tight, and I squeezed back. We held each other for a long time before I squirmed to leave.

"I have to go," I said.

For the first time, he didn't help me to the floor.

"First, will you tell me something?" he asked in a soft, pained voice.

"Of course."

"Is there another house?"

I stroked the nearest wall with my tongue, the way he liked. He had always been insecure. "No, of course not."

I hated hurting him, and I hated what was happening between us. I wanted to apologize, to stay in his warmth and take his nipple. But I was

vulnerable to backpedaling, to finding my comfort in familiar places. That, I realized then and there, was the source of my problem.

When he opened the door for me, I could hear his heart beating fast.

Precipitation wasn't scheduled in Seattle for another week, so the twilight sky was clear and deep in all directions. To the southeast, Mt. Rainier was aglow with Festival colors. A slender crescent moon hung overhead, its nightside sparkling with the tiny bright beads of cities and villages and flyways. A telescope would have picked out the slow glints of sailing ships on the Sea of Tranquillity. Years ago, I had called Luna home. Gazing upward, I didn't halt the wistful memories that poked their heads around the corners of my thoughts. I could practically taste the orange-peel bite of lunar dust blowing in the nearside air.

Folks of my bioform are not uncommon in those places humanity has remodeled for its comfort. After my morph, I was Luna's best spit-and-polisher 'tween Armstrong City and Starside Towers. Back then, oh I had plans! The moon was just a stepping stone, you bet, to Mars and the 'roids and the gas giant metroplexes. To working my way from place to place with a job I loved and a body custom-designed for the task. My chosen profession was secure. No matter where humanity spreads itself, from the transient empires of oldtime Earth to the hundred twirling worlds of the solar system, we've always needed someone to do the cleaning.

But.

Like so many others, even those who respond to the "Be All That You Can Be" jingle of the morphing clinics, I fell victim to complacency and familiarity. I settled down. Developed a routine. Sure, I had my diversions; it's hard to be a hermit on Luna. Joined a cooking club. Subscribed to magazines. Watched travel documentaries. Entered a porn net that catered to morphs. Every year I did the New Seas/New Sites submersible cruise. In short, I dug myself a rut and pulled the moondust in after me.

Eventually, Luna became too small, too crowded; but by then more distant shores—Mars, the Jovian bubbleburgs, Faraway Station—had lost their exotic appeal. I returned to Earth, met House, and let life become orderly, predictable, and (worst of all) comfortable.

Now here I was, staring up at the stepping stone I never got around to using. Beyond it, Mars and Jupiter were mocking red eyes against the stars. I absently snatched a strand of spider silk from the air and let it melt in my mouth. What could I have done if, back then, I had taken that next step? Perhaps discovered treasures beneath the Martian crust with the Polar Caverns Expedition. Or created mountain-size ice sculptures in Saturn's rings. Maybe right now I'd be assisting the Uranian Transformation.

What if I were Tan, with an entire life and its boundless potential still ahead of me?

But I'd missed my chances, made my choices. Nothing could refabricate lost time.

The sky above Rainier was sprinkled with stars, and tiny artificial fires moved among them. I looked toward the Festival lights and imagined Tan soaring and diving with her new, young friends.

What if I started over?

It was time to morph again.

Yes! That was it! If I didn't like my life, why *not* start over with a new one? From now on, life was on *my* terms, dammit! New vistas and adventures! Look out, worlds—here I come!

Change makes me nervous. I'd squirted out a puddle of warm carbon tetrachloride before even realizing my peds were wet. Mortified, I glanced around for witnesses, then padded quickly away and boarded a chatty transport bound for the mountaintop.

Morphs were only a fraction of the Festival's population. But they were the only people worth seeing. Too often, mundanes bumped into me with their knees and feet, saying "Oh! Excuse me!" and smiling uncomfortably before hurrying on. Others never even looked down. They had a farmy smell that squatted on my tongue. Tourists.

A strolling food-tree offered me a mug of sweet, smoky ale, and I repaid in kind by buffing and polishing her trunk. I joined a family of musical instruments in a boisterous singalong. A many-limbed juggler tossed fiery shapes that looped and twisted through the air in intricate patterns and flourishes. Folks of a thousand vocations and aesthetic preferences strode, fluttered, or wheeled around me.

A light snow was falling. Billions of carefully designed flakes reflected the Festival lights in flecks of gold, blue, amber, green. They fell alongside the walkways and public spaces, building ever-changing sculptures of colored ice. Miniature fairy tale castles, statue-portraits of people standing near, still-life scenes from history and legend. They grew, melted, and reformed under the guidance of some hidden master artist, who probably studied at one of the arts institutes orbiting Saturn. Maybe I should apply there. I was considered creative, once. When I was young.

Where was Tan? A few hundred meters up, at the mountain's peak, a cluster of dirigibles and smaller floaters hovered near a campfire. I pushed my way through a grove of legs, then stopped, astounded. A sparkling ice statue had formed nearby. It was of me. Its frozen face stared toward the mountaintop, a mask of apprehension and anticipation.

* * *

"Johann!"

Tan saw me as I trudged up the slope. She drifted down, her bulk eclipsing the stars.

"Hi!" she said when she was near enough to avoid shouting. Firelight painted fitful patterns across her hullskin. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming? Let me take you up to my friends. Oh, Johann, they're all so fantastic! And almost as smart as you." Her old smile had not been changed by her morph. It was merely much larger now.

"I need to talk with you first," I said.

"What's the matter?" She settled to the ground, pressing a long, shallow crease in the snow.

The words hung in my throat. "I need advice."

"*You're* coming to *me* for advice! Oh, Johann, thank you!"

"For what?"

"For being my best friend since I was little. For letting me tag along during your rounds, and always knowing the right things to say when I needed it. Even when you had to scold me. And for now telling me that I'm grown up and we're still friends. Thank you."

I blushed, then took a deep breath. "I want to morph."

"But you don't know what you want to be when you grow up. I remember this conversation." She was one sharp lady. I wondered what it felt like, being a balloon.

I watched myself reflected in her mirror-blue eyes. "Do you know what wanderlust is?" I asked.

"You better believe it. It wasn't fun, knowing my parents wanted to be o*ut there* more than with me. I really can't blame them, I guess. They did their duty for the survival of the species, then sent me greeting cards from the far edge of human space. It must be wonderful to see the whole universe above your head, then look down and there it is again, beneath you."

"You always did like to talk about traveling."

"It's in my blood, I guess. You told the most wonderful stories about distant places. Sometimes I couldn't tell which were true and which were made up. But I loved them all." She reached out with a slender arm and laid her palm on my back. "You made a difference."

We talked for a long time. Of lost opportunities, of youthful ideals and dreams, and of a life spent ignoring the world around me. After a while, we just looked out over the Festival. The sounds of music and laughter and, above all, *people* bounced and blended around us. Seattle was an illuminated quilt to the northwest. Tan scooped me into her long arms and lifted me to her skin. The ground dropped away from us.

"I want you to meet some people," she said.

* * *

Tan's friends included a nano designer, a cloud composer, two passenger carriers with literary aspirations, and a veteran spacer. Like Tan, the composer had only recently morphed for the first time. The spacer was in his third bioform. They hovered near the campfire, chatting about trivial things and philosophizing about weighty social issues. I got the impression that they all had known each other for a long time—animated gas bags floating motionless or moving about with gentle waves of their membranous fins. They rolled and yawed as they conversed, exposing different surface areas to the warmth of the flames. I wondered what protective shell lay beneath their skin to keep their flotation sacs from overheating, but figured it was rude to ask.

They invited me to join their conversations. Often, their topics were far out of my depth. But they never talked down to me or made me feel dumb. I told a joke. They laughed. They coaxed me into talking about myself, and soon they were circled around and above me, listening to my tales of the city streets. Mine was a world they had never thought about before, and that aspect itself excited them. They nodded and looked thoughtful when I explained my desire to morph again. The spacer said he had been there himself.

"Friend," he declared in a rumbling voice singed by age and experience. "What you haven't done with your life is exactly what most folks haven't done with theirs. That's been true since all the way back to the oldtimes. What you got going for you is that you *know* it. And that's the first step in making life start happening to you."

I looked at Tan, buoyant among her friends. She was whispering to her companion, the young nano designer named Orin. They hovered awfully close to each other. He whispered something back to her; she smiled and nuzzled against him. They stroked each other's fins in a way that didn't look entirely casual. That hollow empty space in my gut returned. She would never again be that street kid I had known before her morph.

"Johann." Orin was looking at me. "Tan has an idea and I think it's a good one. I believe the others will, too. How would you like to come with *us?*"

I wasn't sure I liked the way Tan pressed against his body. "Where to?"

"To the Starside morphing clinic. I'm a bioform specialist there; or I was until I quit two weeks ago. After some time there, we're heading out. To the stars! The frontier scouts are bringing back incredible reports. We're going to be among the first to see what's out there!"

"Incredible" was an understatement. The newsnet was cluttered with vids sent back by the scouts. But the whole thing tasted funny to me.

"So where are you going to get a ship?" I said. "The c-buster drive

hasn't been around very long, and starships don't grow on trees, you know."

"They do *now*." He floated closer. "The design is encoded and templated. I created the fabrication programs myself. A fleet of first-wave ships is crystalforming now. All they need are the crews."

I gave him an inquisitive look.

Tan glided forward. "That's us. All of us. We're going to morph together into a single bioform and move into one of the hull casings. We'll be the brains, guts, and heart of our own starship! Imagine it, Johann—we will *be* a starship!" Even on her new face I could see the passion, the commitment. "We've had this planned for some time. I wanted to tell you weeks ago, when I saw how unhappy you were. But Orin said we shouldn't let the word get out before he was sure we could do it. I needed to morph once to check my adaptation phase. We morph in two days. We ship out a week after that." Her huge eyes moistened. "You can come with us if you like."

There it was. My chance. And for not just the solar system, but endless solar systems beyond. A lifetime of missed opportunities would become so much trivial time-serving.

However.

"I'm not comfy with the idea of a group morph. No offense, but I hardly know any of you, Tan excepted. And I'm not one for crowds."

The old spacer bobbed above Tan and Orin. "Don't blame you a bit, no sir. You think it over. It'd be good to have you along, though." A ragged chorus of agreement sang out around me.

I looked up at the starry splash of the Milky Way. Mars and Jupiter were dreary, familiar places in comparison. One of the scouts had even reported evidence of another—nonhuman—presence out there.

"Okay." And that was that.

With a squeal of delight, Tan swam overhead in a rapid climb. When she reached apogee, she twirled along her long axis and, for a moment, I heard the laughter of the little girl I had known. The one who used to visit me.

Us.

"Wait!" I cried into the darkness.

Tan drifted down, wearing a concerned expression.

"What about House?" I said.

For a long moment, I stood there listening to the campfire, the mountaintop breeze, and the rich concoction of sounds from the Festival.

"I can't go," I finally said.

Tan's eyes were pleading.

"I can't leave him. Not now. We've had a lot of years together. There's too much invested in our relationship to just leave him like that. I owe

him at least that much. We used to share everything. But lately I—" I let the thought trail off. "Hell, I'd be leaving the whole fucking solar system!"

Tan studied me. "Is *his* happiness more important than your own?"

I stopped and thought. My mirror images in her eyes sighed. "No. But it's *as* important."

She seemed to think about that real hard. I looked at her and Orin, her chosen partner who would weave them all together into the most intimate family humanity had ever produced. He pulled her close against his side, and it looked right. The others gathered around them, and membranes undulated between them all. She reached down and pulled me against her soft undercarriage. Like everything else about her, Tan's goodbye hugs were much bigger now.

During my trip off the mountain and all the way home, I avoided looking up at anything—the moon, the stars, those far-traveling points of light—that might distract me from my path.

House didn't say a word when I entered him, but the intimacy nook was open and waiting. I stepped inside and sealed the flesh after me. My world was close here, skin-close. Familiar. There was no light, but as the warm, moist walls wrapped around me, I knew where to reach for the nipple, and I took it.

When I awoke late the next morning, I told House that I had to go away for a while.

"But I'll be back in a week. Promise." I gently stroked him, and played my tongue across a firm protuberance. "Then we can talk, like we used to. We can start over. The next time you see me, I'll be a new person."

"Oh?" He shifted me to a new position. "What kind?"

"Secret."

"I guessed you were thinking about morphing," he said. "That's all right. Whatever makes you happy is the important thing."

The week vanished under a cloud of sedation and reorientation. At the Seattle morphing clinic, my new bioform was uncomfortable and cumbersome, like new shoes all over my body. My mind told me that my guts had been removed by a two-year-old and put back in rearranged, my peds were replaced with enormous things that were in the wrong places and moved in awkward ways, and I had new body parts that didn't do what my old parts did. I couldn't wait to show House.

A superbly crafted sunrise tossed ribbons of gold and blue across the city. I visited familiar avenues and boulevards, making a point of not looking down or sniffing out telltale odors. The city felt new, freshly alive, reborn. I said hello to passing taxis and street vendors. None of

them recognized me, but my voice hadn't changed much, so I could feel their double-takes against my back. For the first time in too long, it was a *good* morning. I tried singing, but the freshly minted vocal chords refused to allow it yet.

My mood was shattered by a hammerblow the instant I turned the corner to my street. House was gone. There was nothing of him there. Just a geometrical empty space between the flower gardens.

How could he have left me? We'd agreed to talk it out, to start over. If he didn't want me to morph, he could have contacted me at the clinic. But not this. No note. No token remembrances. No House. Confusion, hurt, and anger made new pains in new places, and I fell to the sidewalk in a parody of my former self. I didn't want to break in a new body this way, but I squatted there on the curb and bawled.

When my new physical responses had run dry, and I sat there wondering what one did to report a runaway home, a shadow fell over me and the rest of the block. I looked up. Sunlight glared off the crystalline hull and c-buster drive of a starship hovering overhead. Tan! She and her shipmates had waited to say goodbye one last time.

I asked her where House was.

"Here I am, you gawky bag of meat!"

The voice from the hull was *House's*. The ship descended toward me. Its lifter fields whipped the air into a dozen tiny whirlwinds.

I stood shakily. Delight and anger mixed together in my throat and came out as "*Why?*"

"Tan called the day you went to the morphing clinic. She said she wanted to be sure you hadn't changed your mind."

"What did she tell you?"

"Everything. I was hurt because you had gone to Tan with your problems. Then she told me what you gave up to stay with me. I thought about that a long time." A miniature cyclone coiled around my body, almost blowing me off my feet. "I decided to go *with* her to Starside. Orin did the work himself. I think he did a good job, don't you?" A ladder descended out of the crystalform shell. "Remember how we used to talk about traveling together?"

Whatever made me happy was the important thing.

"Tan and her friends got a head start," he said playfully. "Let's go!" Then, worriedly, "If you want to."

I stepped onto the ladder and let it carry me into his body. On the way up, I watched my reflection in his mirror-polished belly. The red hair and toothy smile would take getting used to. We were starting over. House (Ship?) and I had some adjustments to make. And talking to do.

But hey. We're only human.

Vroom vroom! ●

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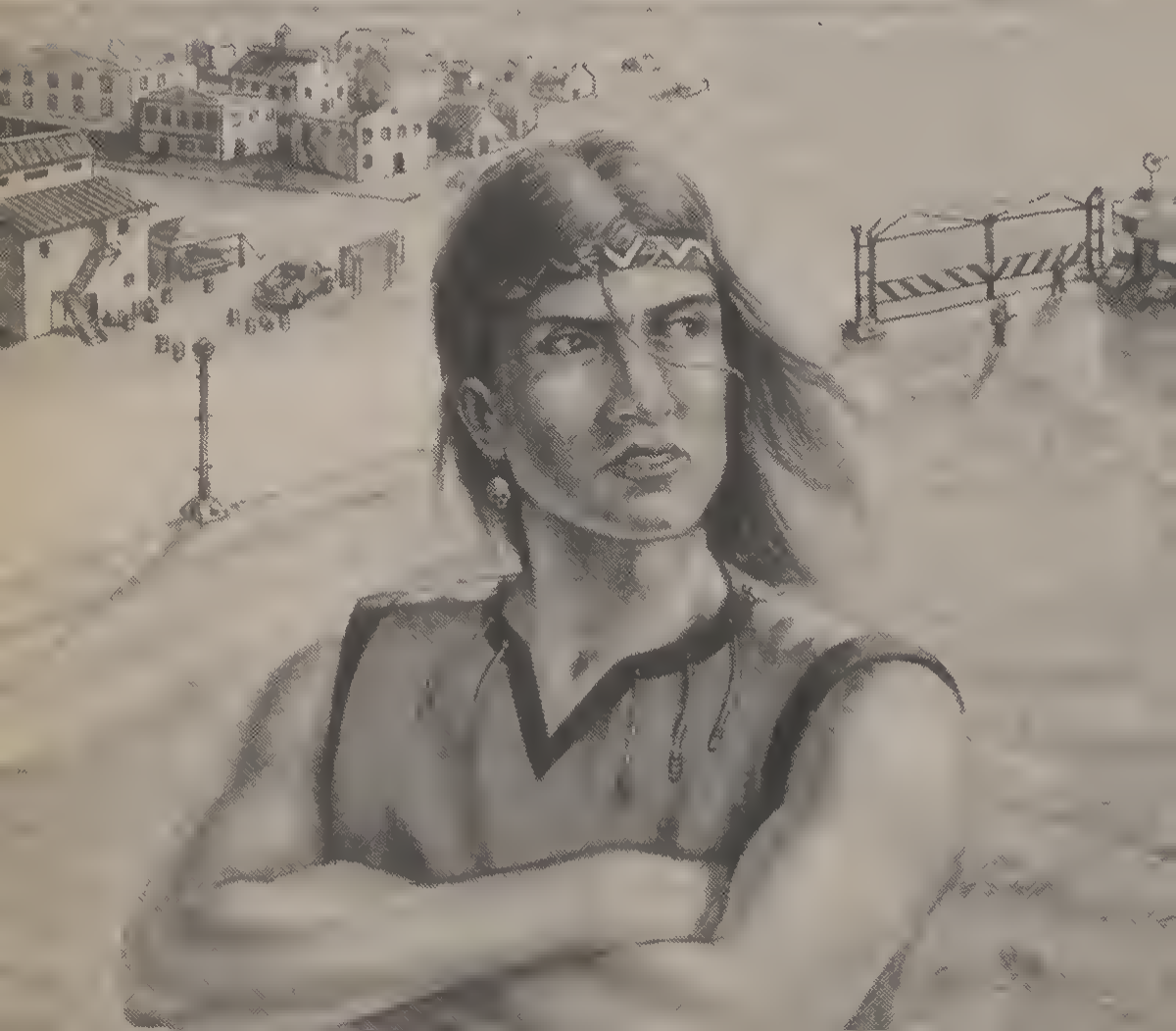
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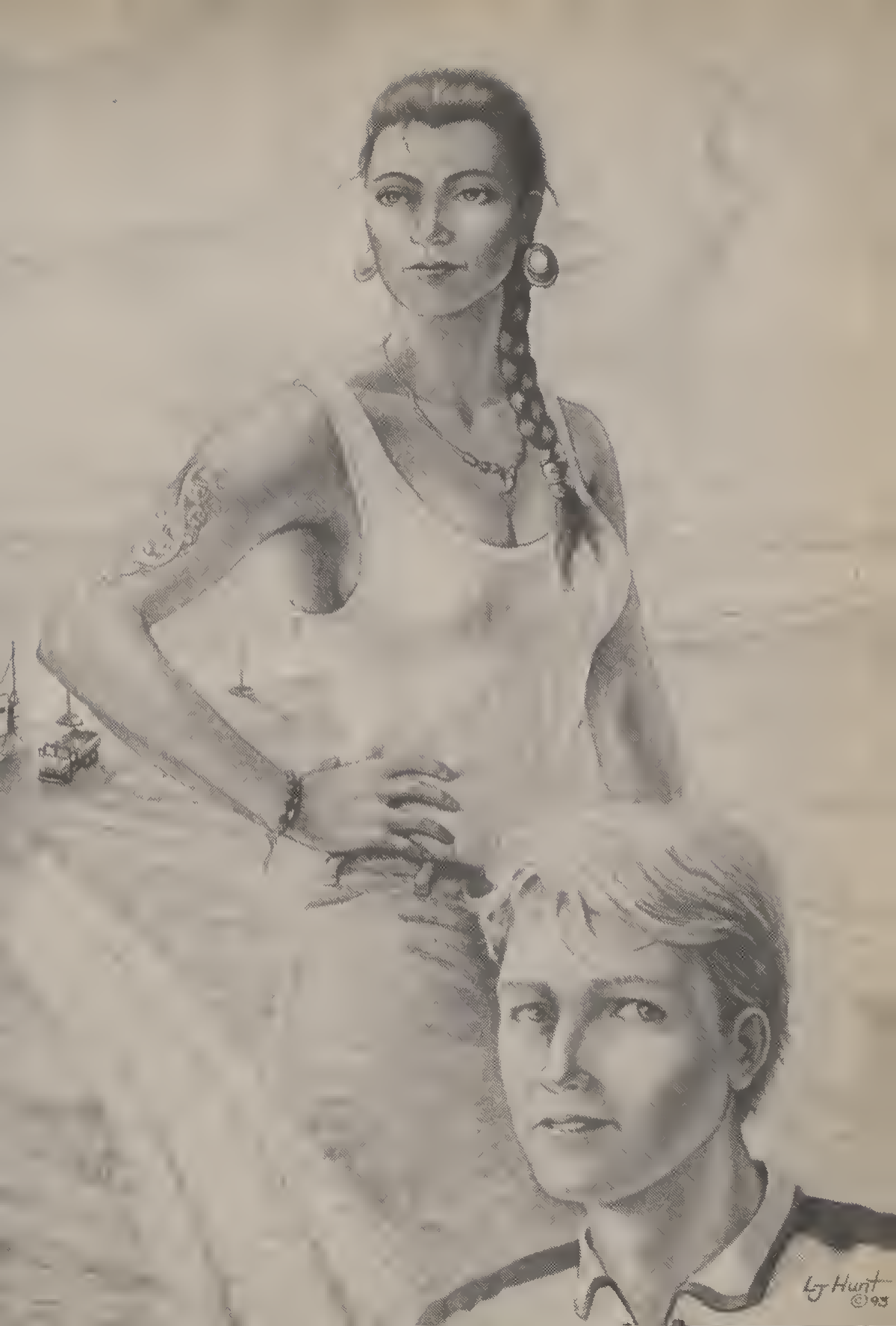
BORDERTOWN

Mary Rosenblum

Barders ond boundories hove olways fascinated Mary Rasenblum, ever since she was o kid, standing disappointed on the invisible line between Pennsylvonio and Ohio. "It seemed ta me thot there had to be s*amething* there, even if it wasn't a white line pointed ocross the landscape. I just hod to get older ta see those lines." Her secand navel, *Chimero,* is just out from Del Rey, and she recently finished a third, *The Stone Garden,* which apens with our Mid-December 1992 story of the same name.

art: Janathan and Lisa Hunt




LJ Hunt
©'93

Josh first saw the Curtain late in the afternoon. The Tortilla Curtain, the Wall, the Fence. It shimmered like a mirage at the edge of his vision; not colorless, but of no color Josh could name. He squinted through the grimy bus window, but rising heat-waves blurred the landscape. A fitting metaphor for the past weeks, Josh thought bitterly. Familiar reality distorted to strangeness. The ancient bus—some derelict purchased cheap from a city fleet—lurched and Josh winced as his shoulder banged the glass. The road looked as if it had been shelled. Which might have happened. The US Border Patrol didn't fool around.

Gritty wind blew in through the window; a furnace breath that licked the sweat from Josh's skin before he could even feel it. Josh swallowed, throat sandpapery, stomach uneasy, wishing that he'd bought two bottles of water before he'd boarded, instead of just one. *Damn* Peter for asking Josh to meet him at this Godforsaken little border crossing.

In the seat behind him, the baby started crying again. The baby's mother shushed him with a murmured cascade of incomprehensible Spanish syllables. Josh touched the translator plug in his ear, rubbing at the annoying itch. The mother unit in his pocket was turned off, and he didn't turn it on. They were all Mexican, the other passengers. Mexican-American, Josh amended, because Mexican nationals couldn't cross the US borders any more. They had stared at him with black, unreadable eyes and expressionless faces as he climbed aboard—the only white face on the bus. They talked softly to each other in Spanish, and he didn't want to understand.

For the hundredth time, Josh's fingers crept into his pocket, fingering the flimsy page of hardcopy wrapped around the flat rectangle of the turned-off translator and the cash card. Peter's letter. *Sorry I couldn't make the funeral, kid. Listen, I need your help. . . .* His help? Help from the tag-along younger brother that he had occasionally tolerated, but mostly ignored? The watch on his wrist caught the light, the old fashioned glass crystal winking like an eye. Dad's watch. Not given, not bestowed, just inherited, because Dad's cheap will had left everything to Josh. Jennifer had come to the funeral. She had said *I'm sorry,* her voice as cool as the touch of her fingers on his hand.

Josh leaned forward, shirt sticking to the patched vinyl seat, sweaty back briefly cool as the oven-wind dried it. The woman in the seat behind him and across the aisle—the one with the mirrorshades—was staring at him again. Josh watched her from the corner of his eye. She had a light-tattoo on her arm. Implanted optic fibers formed a serpent twining through roses. They glowed like neon whenever her arm was in shadow. It hadn't really surprised him to find that Peter was down here. The *ejido* wasn't really Mexico and it sure as hell wasn't the US. It was a narrow

little country of its own, sandwiched between the US and Mexico; a place without rules.

Yeah, it was Peter's kind of place.

The tattooed woman had noticed his looking. Red lips smiled beneath the blank stare of the shades. Josh blushed and looked quickly away. The transmission groaned as the bus driver shifted gears. *¡Peligro!* A dusty sign slid past the window; red letters superimposed on a grinning skull and crossbones. *Danger!* They must be close to the border. The weird shimmer of the Curtain could have been a hundred yards away or a hundred miles. Josh craned his neck, squinting against the yellow glare of the late-afternoon sun. This time he saw the town; a cluster of desert-colored buildings squatting against the blank backdrop of the Curtain.

Desert had given way to sagging wire fences, shacks, houses made from fake adobe or ancient plywood, even a few of the new solar domes. A fuel station slid past. A scrawny yellow dog raised a leg against one gutted pump. Bullet holes stitched the pump's ruined face; signature of the quiet, ugly war that went on along here. Everything was the color of dust. The sun had sucked all the color from the little town. Josh swallowed again, so thirsty that it hurt. He thought briefly about pulling the bell cord, about getting out right here, catching the next bus north. Keep the money and let Peter go to Hell.

Peter had asked *him* for help. The engine growled, coughed and choked down to an uneven idle. The town ended, dissolved into a war-scape of rubble. An intentional war-scape, caused by bulldozers, not bombs. The border. Throat dry, heart beginning to pound in slow, steady strokes, Josh reached for the bell cord. It was an automatic gesture, like grabbing for something as you fell. There was no cord. Just plastic mounts that might have carried one once.

Outside, beyond the squat concrete buildings of the border station, beyond the shimmer of the Curtain, movement caught Josh's eye. A man? The figure ran through the wasteland of dying sage, blurred to anonymity by the shimmer of the Curtain and rising heat. He was running right at it, feet kicking up puffs of dust, running straight for the invisible, deadly fence.

Josh stiffened, mouth open, a shout frozen in his throat. At the last instant, the man threw his arms wide, like a sprinter breasting the tape. His body jerked, head whipcracking back, then forward, arms and legs spasming like the jackrabbit Dad had made Josh shoot on his twelfth birthday. More dust rose as the man skidded face-first into the sage, drifting away on the hot wind.

"Passport? Hey, *boy!*"

Josh jerked like the dying man, turned. The bus had stopped. A uniformed man was standing in the aisle, hand out.

"Come on, boy." The border agent's thick fingers snapped. "I ain't got all day."

He was white, with blue eyes, gray hair, and a hard, sun-dried face. Josh had expected a Mexican at the entry point. He fumbled in his pocket, sweat springing out on his skin. The folded fifty felt thick as wadded tissue beneath his fingers as he handed over his passport card. His stomach was full of molten lead.

The agent grunted and slipped the card into the reader at his belt. "Anything to declare? How long you plannin' on stayin'?" He snapped the card out without even glancing at the screen, handed it back.

"I . . . just brought clothes. And this." He lifted his wrist to display Dad's old watch. "I'm only staying a couple of days." Josh took his card. No fifty. His face was burning and he hated himself for it.

The agent smirked. "Have fun, kid." He held out his hand to the woman with the baby. "Hope you got your shots," he said over his shoulder.

Josh shoved his passport card back into his pocket. The woman was handing over a grimy piece of hardcopy and a wad of folded bills. In the dusty sage, the dead man lay spreadeagled and still. He had run right into the Curtain. The bus lurched forward, slamming Josh back in his seat. A concrete-block gatehouse slid by, and a tall, metal-mesh gate on a track. More war-scape rubble and then . . .

. . . they were in the *ejido.*

Color. That was what struck him first—the color. The sun was setting. In the softening light of evening, the colors shouted from the crowded streets; hot tropical pinks and vivid aquas. Oranges, bright greens, and blues splashed the mud-colored walls. Vendors hawked silk flowers, baskets of fruit too brilliant to be real, jewelry that showered fountains of colored light into the air, and bottles of vivid drinks. The sun that had faded the US side of the border to desert dun had no effect here. Buildings were square, one or two stories, built of concrete block or adobe. The streets were crowded with people and cars. Old cars that had to run on alco-fuel and had originally been designed for gasoline. A very few electrics. A *donkey,* dropping brown lumps of dung right on the street!

Men and women clustered outside gaudy storefronts, drinking from mylar packs, plastic, and even glass bottles, laughing, talking. A group of youths clustered around what looked like an antique PC set up on a couple of wooden crates on the sidewalk. As Josh watched, they all howled with laughter, heads thrown back, light-tattoos flashing on their shoulders and faces.

The *ejido.* You could get anything here. Sex. Drugs. A new face or a new liver. Fetal cell implants to keep you young forever or fix a damaged

spine. A son or daughter tailored to your design. Death, accidentally or on purpose, in a thousand creative guises. Yeah, this was Peter's world. Josh's stomach tightened as the bus lurched and sighed to a stop. The men and women were gathering bags and babies, shuffling down the aisle.

Swept up by the momentum of their exodus, Josh found himself—through no conscious effort of his own—in the aisle, clutching his pack. With a twitch of panic, he groped in his pocket for the reassuring lump of his cash card and the letter. Bodies jostled him. He flinched at the touch, smelling sweat, and cooking food from the street. He tripped over the bottom step, and stumbled out onto the hot evening street. With a whine of rusty hinges, the door closed and the bus engine roared.

The other passengers were dispersing quickly, casually, with the preoccupied relief of commuters going home. It came to Josh with a sense of shock that they *were* going home—that they were Mexican after all—never mind what the president said about air-tight borders. The sidewalk seemed to shudder with the bus's motion beneath his feet, and he gulped deep breaths of the alien air, stunned by death, and heat, and the colors. The woman with the shades and the roses on her arm brushed past him, a leather handbag tossed carelessly over her shoulder. Her red lips shaped a smile beneath twin reflections of Josh's face. "Welcome to Mexico, *gringo*," she said in English, and laughed.

With its electronic alchemy, the translator turned the sea of Spanish chatter into words so familiar that they made Josh dizzy. He hadn't really expected to understand. He kept his hand in his pocket as he hurried through the crowd, fingers clenched around his cash card and passport, eyes fixed on backs and shoulders and the safe, filthy street. In spite of his translator, he couldn't bring himself to stop someone and ask directions. It took him a long time to find the hotel that Peter had named in his letter. The Sonora cost a lot, and the translator didn't tell him if he should bargain. He paid the fee, shoving his cash-card into the register. It stood on a scarred wooden counter that looked old enough to have been standing here on the day the Alamo fell.

The old man behind the counter showed Josh to an upstairs room. There was one sagging bed, covered with coarse, spotlessly clean sheets, one rickety wooden table, and a single chair. The light came from a naked bulb dangling from a frayed cord that disappeared through a hole in the plaster ceiling, but the shiny plastic box of a Net link was mounted on one wall. Before he left, the landlord offered to get Josh a terminal if he needed it, or a suit of VR skinthins, or a woman, or a boy. He shrugged when Josh declined.

In the single bathroom at the end of the hall, the composting toilet

stank and the bright box of a pay-meter gleamed above the rusty taps in the chipped sink. Josh eyed the reddish water leaking from the fixture like drops of diluted blood and shuddered. A year ago, the idea that he would be here, in this place, would have shocked him or made him laugh. A year ago, Dad had been alive and well, and the future had been a seamless and tangible certainty.

Back in the room, Josh pulled the chair over beside the window. It was getting dark, and the street below was crowded. At this distance, the translator was almost useless. The only words that it translated were the shouts. The effect was strange; as if all communication took the form of greeting or insult or challenge. A side street opened across from the hotel. It ended in rutted dirt and a wall of nothing. The Curtain. Josh looked quickly down at the crowded street.

Bare shoulders and shaved scalps glowed with inlaid light below him. A cluster of young men drank from long-necked bottles in front of the hotel, raucous and rowdy. Vendors wandered along the sidewalk with trays of unfamiliar foods and drinks. Josh knew he should be hungry—*must* be hungry, because he hadn't eaten anything since morning. The thought of walking past those laughing young drinkers and out into that crowded street again made sweat break out on his face, cold in the breeze that blew through the window. He had bought two plastic bottles of water from the landlord. *Agua Tecate* was printed on the label, above a picture of green hills that looked utterly unbelievable in this landscape of dust.

He sipped at the tepid water, grimacing at the taste. It was too dark to see the Curtain now, but you could tell where it was. The lights of the town ended abruptly at a wall of darkness. He was here, Peter was here, and there was nothing else. Burns, Arizona, the old house, Dad's grave—they had ceased to exist. In the distance, someone screamed. Pain? Fear? For an instant, the street seemed to fall silent. Josh closed his eyes, seeing again the spastic, shot-rabbit leap of the man. He fled the window, but the street pursued him, slipping into the room in the smell of cooking food and the beat of music and alien voices. Groping for sleep, Josh burrowed into the coarse sheets, into a night that stretched into endless dark dreams.

He woke to hot sunlight that lay like a weight across his body. Josh kicked away the tangled sheet and sat up, wincing as red lightnings flashed behind his eyes. His head ached, and the sheets were damp with sweat. When he stood, the room tilted and he had to grab for the metal bedframe to keep from falling. Hungry, he thought dizzily. That's all that was wrong with him. It was late—past noon. He'd eat something and be fine.

He shoved his cash-card into the meter slot in the bathroom and splashed tepid water onto his face. It smelled faintly of sewage, and the resultant spasm in his belly doubled him over. Drawing deep ragged breaths, shivering in spite of the heat, he made his way out of the bathroom and down the single flight of stairs to the lobby. No one was behind the scarred counter, and the stuffy twilight of the lobby made Josh gasp for breath.

Outside, sun filled the empty street like the silent clash of brass cymbals. No one moved in the white-hot glare. Doorways and windows were holes into blackness. A single spotted dog lay slack as a roadkill beneath an ancient Datsun perched ridiculously above giant tires. The dog didn't even lift its head as Josh made his way down the street. Last night, food had been everywhere. In the heat of noon, wooden doors and shutters closed the shops, as if the entire population vanished with the sunrise. Josh stumbled into a pile of dung. The donkey? White maggots writhed in the moist clumps, and his stomach twisted again. Leaning against the sun-hot concrete of a shuttered *cantina,* he vomited, bringing up burning yellow fluid tinged with bright streaks of blood.

"Hey, *gringo.*" A woman's voice. "Don't you know better than to drink the water?"

A hand closed on his arm, and he caught a glimpse of tattooed roses on smooth brown skin, dull in the harsh light. She steadied him as he vomited again, moving aside a little, so that she wouldn't get spattered. "It was bottled," he croaked, when he could breathe again. "The water. From the hotel."

"That stuff is okay. Normando never cheats on his water." Fingers touched Josh's forehead, cold enough to make him shiver. "You brought this sickness with you, *gring*o."

With an effort, he straightened, recognizing the woman from the bus. Twin reflections of his face glared back at him from her shades, white and strange. She was wearing a magenta tank top, and her braided hair hung forward over one bare, muscular shoulder.

"Come with me," she said.

"No." He hung back. "Where do you want me to go?" Images of alleyways and knives danced in his head. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"You have listened to too many stories about the border." She tossed the thick braid of her hair back over her shoulder. "My name is María, and I am a *curandera.*" She touched him lightly, just below his sternum. "Come, and I will fix this. Or stay and vomit in the street. Your choice, *gringo.*"

It would be wiser to go back to his hotel, to ask the landlord to call a

doctor. If there *was* a doctor in this place. Peter was supposed to meet him at the hotel. If Peter was even here.

It didn't matter. That seamless, comfortable future had evaporated before he had ever reached the border. Nothing mattered anymore. "I'll come," Josh said.

He stumbled along the baking dirt street with the woman's incredibly strong hand locked beneath his elbow. His knees quivered at every step, and his belly was a pit of hollow pain, waiting to swallow him down forever. A wash of cool shadow blinded him momentarily and he stumbled over the threshold of a door.

"My *yerbería,*" the woman said.

They were inside a shop. Shelves lined the walls, covered with glass and plastic containers of all sizes and shapes. The air smelled pungently of herbs. A single wooden table stood against one wall, beneath a crucifix decked with plastic flowers. The rough adobe walls breathed cool, and Josh began to shiver again. This time it wouldn't stop. His teeth chattered as the woman pulled aside a curtain and led him into a back room. Something nudged the back of his knees and he sat down hard, his vision full of dancing black flecks.

Slowly, Josh's head cleared. He was sitting on a narrow bed covered with a bright spread. The woman stood with her back to him at a table covered with chipped formica, doing something over a hissing propane stove. Dishes—touristy earthenware and cheap plastic—cluttered the stove end of the table. At the other end stood what appeared to be an old-fashioned computer terminal and keyboard, connected to various pieces of hardware by a tangle of mismatched cables. Another small table at the end of the bed was cluttered with a spread of bright cards, a Bible, and a dozen plastic and china statues. Madonnas. Jesus. White-skinned, pious-looking men that Josh guessed to be saints. There was a real rose in a chipped glass vase, and a bowl of dried leaves.

"Drink this." The woman turned away from the stove.

Josh took the thick, red-glazed mug gingerly. The brownish liquid in it smelled like rotting leaves.

She was waiting, arms crossed lightly, her posture relaxed and without impatience. He could drink it or not, her body language told him. *Your choice, gringo.* With a start, he realized that she had taken off her shades, although he didn't remember her doing it. Her eyes were green—emerald, artificial green, set like polished gems in her wide, brown face, bright as the tattoo on her arm. She was laughing at him. Josh flushed, lifted the cup to his lips, and gulped the tea down.

It tasted worse than it smelled. Eyes closed, he took two deep breaths, waiting to throw it up. Amazingly, it stayed down, and the pain in his stomach lessened instantly.

"That is for the illness in your body." She sat down beside him on the bed and scooped the cards from the cluttered table. "I have no tea to heal the illness in your soul." She began to shuffle the cards with a practiced flick of her wrist. "For that, you must look elsewhere."

A fortune-teller? Josh edged away from her just a hair. The pitch would come in a minute. The cost of the tea, the plug to read his future. For a stiff fee, because he was just a dumb tourist, too dumb even to be careful about the water. He *was* feeling better, though. For that, he'd pay her something.

Her mocking smile suggested that she had guessed his thoughts again. "You are running from death." She flipped a card lightly down beside his knee. "You cannot escape, because you carry it with you. To be free of it, you must give it away."

On the shiny surface of the card, a skeleton in armor bestrode a white horse, carrying a banner. The eyeless sockets stared mockingly up at him. Josh recoiled. The woman's smooth brown face might have been a porcelain mask set with green gems. "I've got to get back to my hotel." He groped in his pocket for cash.

"Keep your money." She laughed, and the porcelain mask became flesh again. "You *norteamericanos* are so afraid of Death. Even when you seek it, you deny it. You spend so much money to keep it from you." She laughed again, and the skin at the corners of her eyes crinkled into fine lines. "Here, Death looks over our shoulders all the time. We pass it in the street and we nod. We invite it to our parties. It is everywhere, *gringo*, but you clutch it to you, as if it belongs to you alone."

Josh realized that he was standing, looking down at her. His muscles had levered him to his feet without his even knowing it. "Thanks for the tea." He pulled a bill from his pocket and tossed it onto the bedspread. A hundred-peso note. It fluttered like a falling leaf; settled gently onto the card.

The woman flicked it away with a contemptuous finger. "Do I frighten you, *gringo*?" The tips of her teeth showed between her smiling lips. "I am no *bruja, gringo*. I am a *curandera*. It is my business to heal only." Her smiled widened. "But I can conjure your brother for you, if you wish."

"My . . . brother?"

"The one you came to find. The one you are afraid to find."

"María?" A male voice called hoarsely from the front of the shop. "*¿Està usted aquí?*"

"I am here." María looked past Josh's shoulder. "Speak English, *por favor*. You have a visitor."

Josh turned slowly, the familiar sound of the voice tightening the flesh between his shoulders. "Peter?" The word caught in his throat. The man walking through the doorway was Latino, with shoulder-length hair, a

jutting sweep of nose and dark, hooded eyes. "I'm sorry," Josh said lamely. "I thought you were someone else."

"My God, Josh!" The stranger took two steps forward and threw his arms around Josh. "*Mi hermano*. In the flesh. Hooey, you should *see* your face, kid! María?" Sudden wariness closed down the laughter in his face. "How the hell did he end up *here?*"

"I went to get him." María picked up the empty cup, her green eyes unperturbed. "He was sick."

"Well, she can cure that, if you can stand the stuff she brews." He grinned at her, turned the grin on Josh. "You look like you saw a ghost, kid. You expected blond? Blue eyes?"

"Yeah." Josh shook his head, feeling as if he were suffering from a weird kind of double vision. "I did."

"You can get away with it in the big border towns—Tijuana, like that. Being a *gringo,* I mean. Hell, you've got as many whites and Asians as Latinos in some neighborhoods. But out *here* . . ." He shrugged. "You can have any face or body you want, if you've got the money. I can't afford to stand out, kid."

It was his brother—the same tight lift of his shoulders as he spoke, the pulse of anger behind his words, like a second, hidden, heartbeat. "Peter?" Josh licked his lips, words crowding his skull, too thick to pick through carefully. "You . . . didn't show up." Those words came out on their own, bursting through the press.

"No, I didn't. Jon wasn't supposed to give my address away to *anyone,* and I guarantee you he regrets it." The unfamiliar, Hispanic face had gone cold. "Dad nearly killed me the night I left. I'd still like to get even with the bastard who tipped the principal that I was so deep in the files. She didn't have a *clue,* man." He laughed harshly. "No way I was coming back just to hear the old man tell me one more time that I was a fuck-up. Hell, you're so good at all that dutiful-son stuff. You didn't need *me.*"

Oh yeah. This was Peter. Josh looked down at his clenched fists. Those last weeks had stretched into a timeless eternity; feeding Dad, helping him to the bathroom, wiping his butt, while he whispered, shouted, and cursed at an invisible Peter. Oh, you were *there,* brother, Josh thought bitterly. Even if you didn't know it. "You're right. I didn't need your help." Josh unclenched his fists with an effort. "I'm going back to my hotel to lie down for awhile."

"You can't." Peter's new, brown face scowled. "A cop's waiting for you."

Josh stared at his brother, his brain refusing to process that bit of information, refusing to put it into any kind of rational perspective.

"I told you I was in trouble." This time, the black, alien eyes slid sideways, away from Josh's face. "I guess my new identity isn't as air-tight as I thought, and they made the connection between us. They want to ask you my address."

So what? Josh wanted to yell at this stranger with his brother's voice. This is *your* life. *Your* problem. What the hell has that got to do with *me?* "What about my stuff?" he asked thickly. "And my passport?"

"Son of a bitch." Peter drew the words out into a long, sibilant hiss. "You left your *passport* in your room?" His fist hit the tabletop with a crash. "Not even the dumbest *turista* is *that* dumb! What about my money?"

"I'm not a tourist. I'm here because you begged me for help."

"I didn't *beg* you for anything."

Josh fixed his eyes on the cluttered table. A china Virgin Mary wore a sky-blue cloth over her head. Her face was very white above her clasped hands. "I'll tell them you never showed," he said.

"Just like that, *hermano?*" Peter's voice was low and cold. "And you think they'll believe you?"

Josh didn't look up. Peter's arms would be crossed, his face sullen and closed. Just as he'd stood on that last night, silent in the middle of the kitchen, after Dad had paid his bail and brought him home. Thick silence had clogged the small house as Dad unbuckled his belt. He had used the buckle end, grunting with exertion as he swung it. Peter had just stood there—taller than Dad at seventeen, strong enough to deck him if he had wanted to. No matter how hard Dad hit, even when the buckle drew blood, Peter stood still. There had only been the sound of the blows and Dad's hoarse panting. After Dad had thrown the belt on the floor, only then did Peter walk out the door and out of the house forever.

The Virgin Mary was smiling at Josh, her eyes lowered seductively. "What did you do?" he said. "Kill someone?"

"Not that I know of." Peter shrugged. "I was boosting some R & D files and I got careless, all right? One of the big multinationals is pissed at me. No big deal. I just need to disappear for awhile."

"It sounds like a big deal to me. Why don't you try something *honest*, Peter?"

"You sound like Dad." Peter's new black eyes were flat and unreadable as stone. "You really do, kid. You're such an angel, I suppose. Yeah, you probably *are*. You always were. Honor student, teacher's pet, the guy who always did his chores and made his bed. And now you've inherited Dad's job at the plant—yeah, I checked you out, kid. You still live in the old house. You've never done a thing *Dad* wouldn't have done."

"You're wrong," Josh said softly. "I don't live in the house anymore, and I *did* do something Dad wouldn't have done. I came down here to get your ass out of a sling."

For a moment Peter's face went very still. Then he laughed, head thrown back, teeth flashing in his brown face. "Now we both have our asses in a sling. Thanks to you, *turista.*"

"The problem has a solution." María leaned forward. She had absented herself from their bitter conversation, as completely as if she had left the room. Now the scene seemed to refocus on her, as if the contents of the room had rearranged themselves in an instant. "The hole in *el muro* is big enough for three," she said to Peter.

"If he doesn't chicken out and get us all killed. And what about the money?" Peter said. "I'll have to owe you."

"Your brother will pay me." María reached out to cup Josh's chin in her long fingers. "On the other side. You understand a debt, *gringo*, so *you* will owe me."

"I didn't know that you were afflicted with trust, María." Peter's lip curled.

"Only a fool would trust *you*, *querido*." María smiled sweetly.

"Well, excuse me. I think I'll go finish getting ready for our little excursion." With a jerk of his shoulders, Peter stalked out of the door.

"You're talking about going through the Curtain." Josh swallowed. "I thought no one could do that. And what about my passport and my cash-card?"

"What good is your passport to the police, if you do not pass through a gate?" María's red lips smiled. "*Los Estados Unidos* has no interest in the affairs of Mexico. To your country, the continent ends at *el muro*. Your passport will be sold on the market. *Norteamericano* passports bring a good price. Your money, of course, is already lost."

"You went through on the bus. I saw you," Josh said. "You all went through. Why can't we do it that way?"

Maria shrugged. "*Los anónimos* go through to do the jobs that you *norteamericanos* want them to do. *I* go through because I am María and I bring the others. There is no place for you on that bus, *gringo*."

In the outer room, the tiny bells chimed. Josh's muscles tensed all at once.

"A customer." María put a hand on his arm. "Rest for awhile, *gringo*. Sleep. It is safe here." She ducked through the curtain.

Josh heard a low murmur of voices in the outer room. The translator was back in his hotel room, too. The cadence of those syllables could mean gossip, or a bargain struck, or betrayal. There was no way to know. Josh shrugged and stretched out on the narrow bed. He was living in each moment of the present, cut off from those moments that had passed and those that had not yet arrived by the invisible shimmer of the Curtain. *El muro*. There was no pillow. The woven spread smelled of herbs and something musky and animal. María? An erection prodded his jeans, unexpected and urgent. He closed his eyes and thought of Jennifer, trying to call up her face, her smile, the swirl of her hair. All he could remember was the splintery feel of the garage windowsill beneath his palms and

the brown gleam of her naked, suntanned shoulders as she writhed beneath Peter on the ratty old sofa. Josh rolled over, burying his face in the spread, wondering if Peter and María had made love on this bed.

He came awake with a cry, to twilight and María's face bending over him.

"What time is it?" He sat up, blinking, muscles still tense with the aftermath of his dream.

"Evening. Dreams are the spirits, speaking to you." María sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I wasn't dreaming," he said, but faint memory shimmered at the edges of his mind—echoes of rage and red violence. "I never remember my dreams."

"Not everyone wishes to hear the spirits."

"Do you really believe in that stuff?" He jerked his head at the cluttered table. The statue of the Virgin was a blue-and-white blur in the shadows. "Saints and spirits and cards?"

"I could tell you that dreams are a manifestation of your subconscious, that they are a way of dealing with events that you cannot face consciously." She looked at him gravely, but laughter quirked the corners of her mouth. "I am a *curandera,*" she said. "I heal with whatever works. Sometimes, it is herbs. Sometimes, it is what I hear in the market, or information from the Net. Sometimes, it is the symbols that have meaning for the soul." She bent her head in a little bow to the table.

"Is that why my brother came to you?" Josh asked. "For healing?"

Frowning a little, she turned her arm slowly, so that the tattooed snake writhed in its bed of roses. Her eyes gleamed like backlit emeralds, and Josh wondered again if she and Peter had made love here on the hard, narrow bed.

"Your brother came to me to buy a hole in the Curtain," María said at last.

"Peter's tough." Josh shrugged. "Trouble never bothered him much when we were kids. I think he liked the spotlight. Or maybe he liked it that it pissed Dad off when he got into trouble."

"Some wounds heal. Some do not." María's voice was low, introspective, as if she was talking to herself. "They fester and turn inward, until the soul eats itself, like a trapped coyote gnawing at its own flesh. If you are done sleeping, you can eat." She nodded to the table against the wall. "There is time before we leave."

Before we leave. The words—spoken out loud—dried the inside of Josh's mouth. A green plastic bowl and a cloth-covered basket stood on the battered wooden surface. The computer terminal was on, and the blue glow of the screen was the only light in the room. Darkness had filled

up the small space while they talked, and the roses on María's arm glowed like blood-colored neon in the dim light. Josh swallowed, but his mouth remained dry.

"The *ejido* is a place of desperation," María said softly. "You do not live here by accident. The past crowds at your heels and *el muro* cuts off the future. It is not shameful to be afraid here, *gringo*."

"A picnic!" Peter's voice preceded him through the doorway, too loud and cheerful for the dark room; so much more familiar while darkness hid his strange new face. "I hope you brought beer," he said. "Hell, do we have to sit in the dark?"

María bent and retrieved a solar lantern from beneath the bed, clicked it on. Its colorless light twisted her shadow across the floor and up the wall as she handed Peter a plastic bottle of the Tecate water.

Peter made a face and peered into the bowl. "Beans and tortillas. How ethnic. Did you have a nice rest, *hermano?*"

"What was your plan anyway?" Josh watched his brother fold a tortilla and scoop beans from the bowl. "What was I supposed to do when I got down here? Carry you home in my suitcase?"

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't go back to that dead-end hole if you *paid* me. I have more fun down here." Peter handed the filled tortilla to Josh and reached for another. "I was going to pay María with the money you brought. She was going to open a hole for me, so they'd look for me up north. I was headed . . . elsewhere. The plan hasn't changed. Watch out for the beans, *turista*. They're hot."

"Except that now I have to risk my neck along with you." Josh took a careful taste. His eyes watered and he swallowed fast, damned if he'd grab for the water.

"Your fault." Peter took a huge bite of beans and tortilla. "Are you really happy in that shithole of a town?" he said with his mouth full. "Yeah, you probably *are.*" He swallowed, grinned, and reached for the water. "You'll get married—it kind of surprised me that you're not married yet, by the way—have a nice, legally licensed kid. You'll spend the rest of your days manufacturing cheap plastic junk for the highest corporate bidder and going to church on Sundays. Never a worry in the world, as long as you don't catch anything Fed Med won't cure."

Get married? Oh yeah, he'd wanted to do that. *I love you,* he had said to Jennifer. Her hair had gleamed like spun gold on that long-ago afternoon, spread out across the arm of that dusty sofa as she cried out *I love you, Peter.*

I love you. Jennifer had been kind to him. Kind. "Shut up, Peter." Josh laid the rest of his tortilla down on the tabletop. "Just shut up, will you?"

"You know, I almost hoped you *wouldn't* show," Peter said softly. "I almost hoped you'd tell me to go to hell. But you always covered for

me—doing the dishes when it was my turn, lying for me when I skipped school—good old dependable Josh! I was a real shit to you, too. I never could get you to take a swing at me."

"Knock it off, Peter."

"Not once. Do you really trust me to pay you back?" Peter took another bite of his tortilla. "I bet you brought me your life savings, didn't you? I bet you were going to try and convince me to come back home, repent, and go straight, right? I bet you still go to church every Sunday. Just like Dad."

If he *hadn't,* it would have shown up on his personnel file and he would've gotten fired. Dad was sick, and he had needed his job. "Yes," Josh whispered. "I went to church." He squeezed his clenched fists between his knees so that Peter couldn't see how his hands were trembling. If he moved, if he said a word, a single Goddamn word . . . he'd kill Peter. Here, now, with his bare hands. The knowledge filled his head, sweet and clear as a bell, sharp as the stink of his own sweat.

A touch on his shoulder made his muscles jump. Josh lifted his head and found himself staring into the gemstone glitter of María's eyes. She knew. He shivered, unable to look away. A stillness was creeping into him, following the shiver down through his flesh; a *pause* that settled deep into his bones. His hands had stopped shaking. María nodded very slightly as he laid them gently on his thighs.

"No, I didn't come down here to bring you home, Peter." Josh drew a slow breath. "The money on that cash card was yours. Half of what I got for the house. We're quits, Peter. After tonight, I don't care if I never see you again."

Peter stared at him for a long moment, and something moved in his dark eyes. Then he laughed, teeth flashing, head thrown back. "You lost *my* money? You bastard! Oh well." He shrugged, still grinning crookedly. "You know, just once, I'd like to see you really get mad. Cut loose and swing on me."

"No," Josh said softly. "You wouldn't." He turned to María. "Is it time to go yet?"

"*Sí.*" Her eyes flickered as if she heard the desperation he was successfully keeping out of his voice. "In a moment." She turned to the ancient terminal. The monitor screen glowed to blue life as her fingers danced over the grimy keyboard.

"María's hot," Peter said. "The best co*yote* in the business. Never loses a client, going across. Kid, you're with *me* now, and I know how to pick 'em."

"*Vamónos.*" María stood in a single lithe motion.

There was an authority in her voice that silenced even Peter. She picked up the lantern and led them into the front room. Beyond the

doorless entry to the *yerbería*, people strolled and laughed on the street. Inside, shadows twisted across the walls as the lantern swung. They filled the crowded shelves with a false hint of movement, as if a thousand tiny demons scuttled among the mismatched jars. Outside in the street, two young girls with tight-braided hair and hungry faces leaned over a pile of hardware set up on a wooden bench against the wall. A skinny kid worked the keyboard, shoulders dipping, hips twisting, as if he was dancing, or working in VR, as if his whole body was pouring input into those grimy plastic keys. Sweat darkened his neon-orange tank top.

Josh wondered what they were hungry *for*, wondered what they were hunting. Maybe it was just a game. Sure. He tucked his chin closer to his chest, feeling naked and vulnerable in his white skin. He half expected every person on the crowded street to turn and stare, like they'd done on the bus. An old woman was selling food from a tray, chanting her pitch in a cracked singsong. Josh couldn't see what it was, but the spicy aroma made his stomach growl briefly. She didn't look at him. She didn't direct her words to them at all, as the three of them walked past.

No one was looking at them. It took Josh another fifty yards to be sure of it. Eyes focused elsewhere. Bright words flowed around them as if they were invisible. Josh looked at the curve of María's back. In the shadows between the pools of light that seeped from *cantina* windows and battered solar lanterns of all descriptions, the roses on her arm glowed like a tracing of liquid fire. Like a beacon to lead them. Josh followed it, recognizing power in the smooth junction of her spine and shoulders. *Curandera? Coyote?* This was *her* town. They were invisible, because they were with María and she wanted them to be invisible.

She turned left at the corner of a crumbling adobe building that might have been a hotel or a big store once, but was full of darkness now. The dirt street dwindled to a track within a dozen yards. Somewhere off to their left, a goat bleated and a dog barked a single sharp warning. She halted them beside a hulk of shadow that resolved itself slowly into a falling-down shed cobbled together from rusty scraps of metal roofing. "Now we wait," she said.

"You want to cross *here?*" Peter pushed past Josh, clutching at María's glowing arm. "Are you crazy? The gate's less than a mile from here. My God, we'll walk right into them!"

He was afraid. Peter, who wasn't afraid of anything, who had laughed at Dad's rage, at his beatings. It came to Josh, with a small buzz of shock, that he *wasn't* afraid, that the last traces of fear had evaporated into the hot darkness sometime during their walk through town.

María waited silently until Peter let go of her arm. "This is where the hole will come," she said. "They look no harder here than elsewhere. You may go back, if you wish. Hire another *coyote*."

"No." Peter was breathing hard, as if they'd been running. "I can't. You know what they'll do if they catch me. I've got to get out of here *tonight*. You'd sure as hell better be right."

María ignored the shrill note of threat. No, Josh thought. They had never been lovers. The soft, colored glow of María's tattoo lighted his brother's face, cast stark shadows beneath brows and cheekbones. He looked old. Much older than his twenty-seven years. Perhaps he had asked the surgeon to make him look old, Josh thought, but there was a weariness etched into the flesh of his face that went deeper than cosmetic work, went clear into the marrow of Peter's bones.

"What are you going to do after you go through?"

Peter's eyes evaded his. "Move on to new turf, like I told you. Maybe Chile. Maybe New Bolivia. I don't think I'll tell *you* where, *hermanito*." The malice in his voice was brittle; a thin shell, covering his fear.

"You've been running ever since you left home, haven't you?"

"I don't *run,* little brother." Peter bared his teeth. "At least I'm my own man. *I'm* not going to waste my life living up to Daddy's expectations."

"Aren't you, Peter? Dad never gave a shit what *I* did or didn't do," Josh said softly. "He never noticed. He was too damn busy fighting with *you*. Yeah, I covered for you, Peter. I thought maybe it mattered, maybe things would get better. I didn't understand."

"Enough." María's green eyes seemed to glow with their own light. "It is time."

Peter drew a hissing, ragged breath. Time. María laid her palm across her tattoo. When she lifted it, the fibers had gone dark. That darkness was absolute, as if the tiny threads of glowing light had been a lantern. It was there, in the dark, ahead of them. The Curtain. *El muro*. It tugged at Josh, promising violent epiphany and oblivion. Promising escape. Suddenly Josh knew why that man had run, arms spread, through the dust and heat.

"How does it work?" he asked hoarsely, needing words, the sound of a human voice. "How do you make the hole happen?"

"Screw the tour, kid."

"I don't *make* it happen." María took Josh's hand—her fingers felt cool and dry—led him forward through the darkness. "There are many holes in *el muro*. They happen here, there, all the time. Your technology is not so perfect as you pretend, *gringo*. To cross, you must predict a likely *where*, and then you make the *when* happen." She paused, fingers tightening. "When I say, run behind me. The hole is not wide." A red eye winked in the darkness ahead of them, like a glowing coal, or a red-eyed cyclops.

A warning beacon, Josh realized. More red eyes winked to his right and left. Any warning signs were hidden by darkness, or maybe they

didn't bother with warning signs on this side of the Curtain. They lighted it, near the big towns. *Come here,* the red eyes winked. *I promise you escape. I promise you freedom.*

You could spread your arms and run to embrace it, leap like a dying rabbit and . . . escape. Into the ultimate, irrevocable freedom. Josh remembered the mounted Death grinning from María's card and shivered. *You carry it with you,* she had said.

"*Cinco, quatro, tres . . .*" María hissed from the darkness. "Go!"

Josh ran. His body wanted to live, and it flushed adrenaline through his veins, galvanizing muscles, making his heart pound. What would it feel like, to fry? Back muscles would contract—leg muscles, arms—flinging you into the air like a shot rabbit. His flesh cringed, full of life, dreading death. Rocks bruised his feet through his shoesoles. Sage clawed at his ankles, trying to trip him. How much farther? Ten yards? One? His skin prickled, as if his hair was standing on end. Nerves, or the hole closing? Josh stumbled and fell, slammed breathless by the rocky ground. He scrambled forward on hands and knees.

"It's okay, kid." Close by, Peter laughed a high-pitched, breathless note. "We're through. God damn, we're through!"

"Not yet." María appeared, a darker shadow in darkness. "They know we are here. The sensors show them every owl and lizard. They are on their way."

"Now what?" Peter's voice went hoarse. "You're supposed to keep that from happening!"

Engine-noise in the distance, not loud. It had to be a patrol vehicle. Josh knew that he should be terrified, but he wasn't terrified. He felt only a sense of anticipation, as if this was a scene he had rehearsed in some past life or distant dream. "It's all right," he said to Peter, and a small part of him wondered if it really was. "María knows what she's doing."

"All right, huh?" Peter's voice had gone shrill. "Do you think you're *safe,* Anglo? They'll shoot you as fast as they'll shoot us—in fact, they'll shoot you *first.* What now, María?"

"This confuses their scanners." She held out a flat, gray rectangle, aiming it toward the engine-growl in the darkness. "Go that way and stay low," she murmured. "You are coyotes. Think of coyote hunting, hiding. *Believe* it, *gringos,* until you grow fur on your skin! When they come looking for you, lie flat and think about the fleas biting you. *¿Comprenden?*"

They ran, not too close together and not too far apart, flying like moths to the flame of the Patrol. Crouched low, Josh scrambled through clawing sage, running almost on all fours. Think coyote. He could hear the low murmur of the Patrol vehicle's electric engine; closer now. Would they

hold their fire, if they realized he wasn't Mexican? Or was Peter telling the truth ?

He flung himself flat behind a bush as a car door banged, heart slamming his ribs, thoughts a coyote's thoughts of hiding and flight. Voices scarred the night, blurred by the sage, Spanish or English, Josh couldn't tell. What would they use? Handheld thermal scanners? Something like that. He pressed his face into the dust, trying not to breathe, eyes squeezed closed, waiting for the footsteps to crunch in the sand beside him, waiting for that adrenaline-rush of *aha,* like when you were a kid playing hide-and-seek, only this time, getting found didn't mean being *it,* it meant being *dead.* . . .

Footsteps crunched; close, closer. . . . "Damn scanner's acting up again tonight." Texas drawl, lazy on the night air. "But we got three *mojados* out here, sure."

"Or coyotes." The other voice sounded grumpy. "The four-legged kind. Could've been."

"Coyotes." Texas-voice snorted. "One *coyote* with two legs. Bet you a beer at The DewDrop."

"Done."

Voices and footsteps were getting fainter, moving away. Safe, oh God safe, they'd missed him with their faulty scanner. He risked lifting his head—not very high (be a coyote)—and froze. Trick of desert acoustics—they were closer than he'd thought. Two men, dressed in camo, with night-goggles like ugly masks. They carried automatic rifles. The new soldiers of a new army. And he was the enemy.

Be a coyote. María's whisper in his head, a hint of invisible fingers on his shoulder. He held very still, breathing softly. He had gone to earth on a high point. The ground sloped gently away from him to the east. The two agents were walking across the slope, heads turning as they scanned the empty desert. Josh caught his breath. Peter. It might have been a deeper patch of shadow beneath a twisted clump of sage, but he knew with absolute certainty that it was his brother lying flat in the dust.

The Patrol men were going to walk right onto him.

A strange sense of lightness was growing inside him. It expanded like an invisible bubble, encompassing the sage-covered slope. It froze the patrol agents in mid-step, as if time itself had stopped. In the absolute silence, a video played in Josh's brain. On that internal screen, Peter leaped to his feet in a wild, hopeless dash. The two agents fell back a step, lifting the short, ugly barrels of their rifles easily, without haste. Bullets streaked the night with fire, and Peter yelled one choked, meaningless syllable as he threw his arms out and fell face down into the dust. Serves you *right,* you bastard. You had everything your way, fucked

around all you wanted and stood in the damn spotlight the whole time. Jennifer screwed *you* out on the old sofa in the garage, because *you* were cool, because you were the bad honcho, the tough guy, the center of the Burns, Arizona universe. She said *I love you,* to you, never to *me.* She never knew I existed, you bastard. Just like Dad never noticed that I existed. You had to have it all, didn't you? You couldn't leave anything for *me,* you stinking, self-centered asshole.

Two more steps, maybe three, and they'd have to see Peter. They couldn't miss. They would shoot and he would die.

The ejido is a place of desperation. María's whisper in his ear, or the sound of dusty wind? *Your choice, gringo.*

Josh's fingers closed around a rock. The bubble of frozen time popped soundlessly and motion rushed in like a soundless thunderclap. Quick! He drew his arm back, flung the stone without aim.

The men spun, rifles raised, ready. "What was that?"

"Over there. No, by those rocks!"

They were scanning the darkness with their ugly, electronic faces, looking for him, for anything. Closer, closer. Josh hugged the dirt, wanting to bury his face, unable to look away. Would he see the muzzle-flash when they fired, or would the bullets hit him before his brain could interpret sight?

Something moved in the darkness, gray, fast, ghosting across the space between Josh and the agents. Gunfire stuttered, and Josh flinched, blinded by the searing blossoms of light.

"Knock it off, you idiot!" Grumpy-voice, loud and angry. "It was a coyote. The four-legged kind, like I told you." He lowered his voice. "If there *is* anyone out here, they know right where we are, thanks to you. With the scanner down, we're about on an equal footing if one of those stinking *mojados* is carrying hardware. I don't like those odds."

"You just want your beer," Texas-voice drawled.

"Screw the beer. Let's head back."

Miraculously, they walked back to their car and got in. As the engine noise faded into the distance, Josh started to shake. María appeared out of the darkness, tattoo glowing once more. Peter was with her.

"*Hermano,* that was a close one!" Peter's laugh was feeble. "I thought they had me, sure. You okay?"

They *did* have you. "I'm fine." Josh tried unsuccessfully to keep his teeth from chattering as he spoke.

"Everything's cool now, kid." Peter sat down close beside him. "María says it's a clear shot into town. You can go to the cops there and spin 'em a yarn about getting robbed—passport stolen and all that. Around here, it happens." He touched Josh's arm lightly. "I would've felt bad if I'd gotten you killed, *hermano.*"

Josh lifted his head to meet his brother's shadowed eyes. "Do you remember Jennifer Hayes?"

"Jennifer?" Peter frowned. "Oh yeah. Long blonde hair. She and I had a thing once, didn't we? Dad nearly busted a gut trying to catch us together. I really had him going."

I love you, Peter, Jennifer had cried. "Peter?" Josh hesitated. "I was the one who told on you. About the school files."

Silence, except for the breathing of the desert.

"You?" Peter's voice came at last, fragile as the whisper of insect wings. "Sonofabitch! Why, Josh?"

"Because Dad loved you. Because he didn't even know *I* was there."

"*Loved* me?" Peter's voice cracked. "Josh, he beat the shit out of me that night. I thought he was gonna kill me. I never could be what the old man wanted, no matter what I did. *You* were the one who did everything right—you were everything he wanted."

"No. I wasn't." Out in the darkness, the Curtain shimmered. *El muro.* It could cut off from past and future, from Burns, Arizona. "I'm not going back to Burns," Josh said. "There's nothing for me there, anymore. I don't know where I'll go." He drew a deep breath. "Want to come along for a while?"

"You're really leaving?" In the glow from María's tattoo, Peter's dark, Hispanic eyes looked like twin holes into blackness. "I don't know." He turned away. "I mean, I've got my own stuff to do, you know?"

So he would go on to another *ejido,* another place of desperation. Peter had never actually crossed through the Curtain. It had merely stretched, and hung between them now as an invisible barrier. Josh stretched out his hand, half expecting to feel its presence. "Dad's dead," he said softly.

"Yeah. I guess he is, isn't he." Peter looked at María. "Let's get this show on the road, okay?"

Her eyes glowed like her tattoo. "This is where you go." She handed him a small scrap of hardcopy. "Ramón will have what you need. If he tells you that he needs more money, tell him that his grandmother the coyote is watching him."

"Don't worry about me, kid." Peter lifted a hand. "I'll do just fine."

"Just a minute." Josh fumbled at his wrist. "I almost forgot." He held out the old watch. "At the end, Dad said that he was sorry. About what happened between you. He wanted me to give you this, to tell you that he understood—that he loved you." The lie dissolved slowly on the night air. It *might* have happened that way, but it hadn't. Burns, Arizona was a place of desperation, too.

Peter reached slowly for the watch. "Thanks," he said very softly. "Take care of yourself, Josh." Darkness swallowed him, leaving only the small sounds of the desert night in his wake.

"What about me?" Josh faced María at last.

"You will go to the Patrol office in town," she told him crisply. "You will tell them that this man robbed you at gunpoint, that he drove back across the border with your money and your passport." She handed him a small, 2-D photo. The man had a pocked, Hispanic face and a predatory air.

"Why him?" Josh handed it back.

"They will take someone, so we will make it *him*. It is justice, *gringo*. Believe it or not. You owe me the price of your escape. This is part of it."

"And for Peter's."

María shook her head. "For some, there is no escape. I do not charge you for what I cannot do."

Josh bent his head, hiding from that emerald stare. The coyote's eyes had glinted like green gems in the darkness. "I almost killed my brother," he said softly. "I think I have wanted to do that all my life." The *ejido* was a place of desperation. Would Peter run to *el muro* one day, arms spread to embrace the only escape it offered? "I don't want to kill him any more," he whispered.

María inclined her head without speaking.

"Wait," Josh said as she turned away. "How much do I owe you? How will I get the money to you?"

"You will come back to me." María looked over her shoulder. "Or I will come to you. You have escaped the *ejido*. You will go many places and do many things. There is enough time for me to collect my debt."

"Did your spirits tell you that?"

"No." María smiled gently. "*You* have told me, *gringo*." She lifted her arm in a glowing salute and walked away into the darkness. ●

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THE SHORN LAMB

John Alfred Taylor

While "The Shorn Lamb" is John Alfred Toylor's first tole for *Asimov's*, his science fiction and horror staries have appeared in *Galaxy, Galileo, Twilight Zone, Night Cry, Aboriginal SF*, ond *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, and he's had mare than three hundred poems published in vorious mogozines. Originolly fram Missauri, the outhar is a professor ot Woshington and Jefferson College in Pennsylvania. Mr. Taylor is currently w[illegible]g on[illegible] science fiction horror [illegible]bou[illegible] Hollywood.

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"And how much of St. Maddoes is left?" asked Phillip after the evening meal.

"Most of the kirk," said Alasdair Ross. "Naught gone save the roof. Amazing for Romanesque this far north."

"The Shorn Lamb's still intact?"

His friend stared. "When last I saw it. But exactly where did you hear of it, Phillip? And exactly what do you want with the thing?"

"Only to photograph it. And I can't remember who told me about it."

The Scot shook his head portentously. "Take your picture, but dinna lay a finger on the brute."

"You believe the stories?"

Alasdair's red face split in an embarrassed grin. "Perhaps, perhaps not. But the thing's na canny."

"I'll put my lens on it, not my hands. It's too high anyway, isn't it? But how do I find St. Maddoes, beyond 'go up the A838 past Loch Shin'?"

"You've a way further to go—" Ross set down his "wee drappie" of single malt, bent over Phillip's unfolded map. "And have to know when to turn off."

He felt a bit ashamed of his lies when he drove north next morning. Alasdair had brooded through the huge breakfast his housekeeper cooked them, more than once demanding Phillip swear not to touch the carving.

But he was determined to measure the carving as well as photograph it. That was what the folding ladder in the trunk was for.

Curious that a man as sophisticated as Alasdair should echo folk-tradition concerning the Shorn Lamb. According to what Phillip had read and been told, a person who touched the carving was supposed to gain power over the wind, but at a terrible cost. Though as so often in folklore, the cost was more hinted at than specified.

Before he came back to the Highlands, Phillip had reminded himself of the source of the proverb that God tempered the wind to the shorn lamb. In *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne was supposedly adapting a French saying. And who knew where *that* came from? Scotland and France had connections long before Mary came back from Paris a widow; did the proverb have anything to do with the carving? Unlikely, but stranger detours of circumstance had happened.

Not being fascinated by hydroelectric engineering, Phillip found the journey up the side of Loch Shin of little interest until he saw the peak of Ben More Assynt rising to the west beyond the lake. Then came Loch Merkland, Loch More, and Reay Forest. As soon as Ben Stack appeared on the other side of the A838, he watched the left side of the road more carefully, because Alasdair had emphasized that the track he was to turn

off on round the north flank of the mountain was little more than a cattle path.

There the cairn was; merely a gray hump in the heather, and the road beyond two ruts in the bracken. The track rose steeply, and he shifted into lower gear.

At the top, he could see the sea miles away, shining dully in the gray light, before the track went down into a narrow glen. Another two miles, and he sighted the ruins of St. Maddoes on a rise ahead of him. The only picture Phillip had seen of it was a poor wood-engraving in a Victorian travel-memoir, but it had been exact enough in detail for him to recognize the place at first glance.

The road led past the ruins, and he stopped the car on a slope, set the brake, and opened the trunk. Laden with camera bag and folding ladder, he began to climb through the heather with the whaups crying overhead.

Even with the chill wind, he was sweating when he reached the south door, with its grotesque carvings. Taking the ladder around the corner where it wouldn't show up, he opened his camera bag and extracted his Canon to shoot the door and its round arch from several angles. Then he went in to record the nave, the chancel, and the chevron ornamentation of the arch that separated the chancel and apse, amazingly well-preserved for a place without a roof.

Now he'd done his solemn duty, and could take a first look at the Shorn Lamb.

The wind from the sea was gusting fiercely when Phillip emerged, almost throwing him into the masonry as he went around the front of the church with the ladder. The carving was on the north wall just beyond the northwest corner. And only eight feet up, so he could reach it easily once the ladder was unfolded—low enough to show it was *meant* to be touched, though set high enough not to be touched by accident.

Phillip's hat blew off, and he had to drop his burden and chase it a dozen yards down the side of the church before he could return to look at the Shorn Lamb without distraction.

An impressive bit of sculpture for a nameless master mason, though blurred by centuries of wind and rain—stylized enough so that it half-reminded him of the carvings on the church at Kilpeck in Herefordshire, yet much more realistic overall. This lamb was definitely shorn: every rib and tendon showed, powerfully suggesting the way it stood trembling in the cold.

The almost skeletal face was turned out from the wall, looking down, its chiseled eyes and grin strangely malignant for an Agnus Dei. But this one bore no cross or flag, might stand for something else.

Phillip reloaded his camera, took a half-dozen pictures from the ground, then opened the ladder and settled it solidly. Before he began to

climb, he felt the pocket of his oilcloth coat to be sure of his measuring tape.

He was almost to the top when the wind gusted again, and he swayed and tottered fearfully. Reaching up in desperation, Phillip grasped at the Shorn Lamb.

The cold was like an electric shock. A moment later, the stone felt normal, neither warm nor cold; he knew it was merely excitement. Then the wind dropped to dead calm, allowing Phillip to climb and use his tape: he measured each dimension two or three times before writing them down.

Moving the ladder right and left, he took closeup photos of the Lamb from both sides, then packed up and made his way carefully down to the car.

Phillip sang "MacPherson's Farewell" as he drove back:

Sae rantin'ly, sae wantonly,
Sae dauntin'ly, gaed he;
He played a tune and he danced it roon'
About the gallows tree.

He had the measurements of the Shorn Lamb, and a photo from every angle possible without a helicopter, with no legendary curse gnawing at his vitals. But then, he didn't have the Second Sight. Or believe in it either, though he had met Scots in love with the cliché designating them as "those psychic Celts."

Nevertheless, best not to worry Alasdair by telling him he'd touched the Lamb.

When he saw Loch More ahead, it had whitecaps on it, though later, when he passed it and saw the water glassy and flat, with hardly a ripple, he decided that it must have been a trick of the muted sunlight.

The sunlight played the same trick on Phillip's vision as he approached Loch Merkland, making a seeming storm out of a calm until he passed. But when he started down the neck of Loch a'Ghriama to the main body of Loch Shin, it looked too odd ahead to be an illusion. Straining his eyes as he drove on, he pulled over and stopped the car after another mile, reaching for his binoculars.

The waves were white ahead, the scrub on the edge of the lake thrashing in the wind, and when he turned the binoculars behind at the tongue of Loch a'Ghriama, it too was agitated.

Curious how calm it was here, though, where *he* was. Almost as if the legend that touching the Shorn Lamb gave one power over the wind were true. . . .

When he stopped a mile further on and again looked forward and back,

there were whitecaps both ways, even if the water just across the road to his right was as still as pooled mercury.

Despite his doubts, Phillip somehow didn't feel much like singing the rest of the way to Lairg.

Alasdair was jolly over a lunch of bread and beef, while Phillip was rude and short. His lies had been stretched too far already.

"No. Don't know. Yes I found Maddoes. Church almost a ruin like you said. Took enough photos. If they come out all right." He blushed and rambled on.

Alasdair spoke with his mouth full. "You didna touch the Shorn Lamb?"

"Oh no, too high."

"Good."

Afterward, Alasdair started up his battered Land Rover and took him south for another look at the Falls of Shin; Philip hadn't seen them for years and found them as impressive in reality as they were in memory. "And as long as we're out, would you like to see Loch Assynt too?"

"Most certainly—Assynt's always worth seeing."

During the whole trip, Phillip was more than usually conscious of the weather. Oddly mild. Always impossible to predict what it would be in the Highlands, especially these long days of the northern summer; but when Loch Assynt was calm, with no mountains to the west but surrounded to the other three directions, he began to wonder.

"Perfect day!" said Alasdair, as they looked west down the Loch.

"Splendid," Phillip agreed. He was merely being silly; where anomalies were normal, even a fine day could happen sometimes.

They drove back with the light behind them, the foliage on the hills glowing till the landscape seemed to shine with inexplicable promise.

Phillip woke suddenly, shaking, and knew that he was awake because the travel alarm by his bed showed 2:11. He'd had a bit too much of the single malt, all right, and they'd stayed up later than was a good idea, but why not, in the summer?

Then he saw *why* he was shaking—what his body already knew.

The Shorn Lamb was at the foot of his bed, almost rampant, with forefeet on the covers, the stink of death too close, its outline limned by the gray glimmer of decay. It bleated and laughed with its skull-face, all bone and teeth except for the rotting eyes, then began to climb up on the bed.

He stopped thinking and screamed.

When Alasdair rushed in and switched on the light, Phillip realized

he'd jacknifed convulsively. His knees were against his chest, the sheet and cover half off the bed.

"What's wrong, Phillip?"

"Nightmare," he said when he could talk. "Only a nightmare."

"Only?"

He nodded, but Alasdair wouldn't look away. "You haven't done anything you were warned against?"

"No."

"Not touched the Lamb?"

"How could I?"

"You could have found the means."

Phillip sighed, and was finally able to murmur, "Yes, I touched it."

"And the Lamb came to you tonight."

"It did."

Alasdair bent over, patted his shoulder clumsily. "Och, Phillip!—if you'd have listened, only *listened*—"

"It was horrible."

"As it will be every night."

Phillip stared up at his friend. "Every night? I'll go mad or kill myself."

Alasdair nodded sadly. "Others have."

"There's no hope?"

"I've heard something, but I'll have to ask a certain person—"

"A certain person?"

"A spaewife I know."

His attempt at a laugh was unconvincing. "A fortune-teller, the local wise-woman? A lady with the Second Sight?"

"This one *is* wise," Alasdair stated. "But we have to wait till the morrow when everyone's awake. Meanwhile, come in and sleep in the same bed as I do. If the Lamb comes, we can shudder together."

The Lamb didn't come, and, after some jostling and shifting until neither encroached too much upon the other's space, Phillip was finally able to sink into a troubled sleep, though he awoke before dawn and lay there wondering if Alasdair's wise-woman could really help him.

"You think she'll know anything useful?" he asked his host as he sat down by the phone after breakfast.

"If anyone will. One thing you can be sure of is she won't say *It's gey an' easie spierin'*."

Phillip tried to smile. "Not like Stevenson's Spaewife then."

"No. Maud Morrison's not one to put you off with na consideration." He leaned over the phone, a moment later was listening to the ringing on the other end.

"Alasdair Ross here. Can I speak to Mrs. Morrison?" He listened a

moment, then added, "Please have her call me as soon as she comes in, it's verra important, life and death. Certainly, certainly. Thank you. Och yes, Scotland Forever, Donal."

"Donal Morrison's a bit of a nationalist," he said as he came back to the table. "I am, too—but he's stuck back in the Seventies. Anyway, Maud Morrison is out in her garden—a very special place with a wall all round where she can be alone—and she has to be alone every day—but she'll call back as soon as she can." The Scot buried his face in his massive teacup.

Phillip raised an eyebrow. "She has to be alone because of her—ah—gift?"

Alasdair frowned. "I suppose so, though she's never explained. But she has the gift, I know. So drink your tea, and meanwhile wait peacefully like a decent fellow."

The rim of Phillip's cup chattered against his teeth before the phone rang, then jarred shockingly as he jumped.

"Now calm yourself," Alasdair told him, picking up the headset. "Aye—"

All Phillip could tell was that the person on the other end spoke rapidly and with emphasis. Alasdair blinked more than usual, then when the spate of words was done, ventured "Dear Maud—"

The voice on the phone was vehement and blunt.

Alasdair tried again. "My friend's touched the Shorn Lamb!"

A question.

"As I told Donal, a matter of life and death."

Alasdair paused to listen before answering: "Just yesterday. And he saw the Lamb tonight, this morning really—"

Another pause. "What can we do?"

He crooked the phone between his head and shoulder, opened his notebook, began to write. "Yes—Yes—My friend's na religious—and he's English. It doesna matter, just so we do it right? Good. Good. I ken the place. We'll be there."

Phillip was on tenterhooks till Alasdair was done writing after he hung up. "I take it there's a chance for me?"

"Absolutely."

"Splendid."

Alasdair frowned. "Yes. Except it'll take your best courage—*our* best courage—because it has to be after dark. When the Lamb walks. We'll have to keep on in spite of whatever we see."

Phillip gritted his teeth. "I should be able to stand it. I *have* to be."

"Fine then. We'll leave before sundown, so we won't make the whole journey in the dark, and meet Maud Morrison at the turnoff by Ben Stack."

"She's coming along?"
"She feels we would be better for her company."
"Quite," said Phillip, able to laugh. "Oh, quite."

Though the hands of the clock crawled, the time came all too soon. Phillip was able to eat a sandwich, and Alasdair made sure he had more than one drap of whisky, though not enough to render him foolish. "Dutch courage is as good as any," he said.

"Then why don't you have another?"

"I'm driving."

By the time they started north, the sun was low to their left, and the waves ahead on Lake Shin shone in sharp relief. The waves in the distance at least, because as they drove on, Phillip shuddered to see how the waves flattened into a swollen smoothness when he went by.

Was there any hope? Or would the Lamb be with him every night until his dying day?

Alasdair was a staunch ally. And judging from the way he spoke of the Morrison woman, she might be even more of "a present help in trouble."

Phillip's attempt to cheer himself succeeded until he had a sudden vision of the Lamb, encroaching into his memory as vilely as it had clambered into his bed last night, the stench of its breath still with him, cold in his mind.

He shuddered as Alasdair drove into the darkness rising up the slopes.

Mist and night were on them by the time they passed Ben Stack. When they slowed for the turnoff a figure waving an electric torch came out of the mist, huge and strange in the fog until Phillip opened the door and stepped out to let her replace him in the passenger seat. "By the way of introduction, young man," Maud Morrison said, turning the torch on herself. What looked like a witch's cloak was merely an oil-cloth jacket with a hood.

Even with the light pointing up, her face was merry and young under the wrinkles, so when she shone it on him, he bowed to her while he squinted. "I'm Phillip Hartley, Mrs. Morrison."

Once in the Land Rover, she turned back toward him. "Good evening. You musn't be afraid of anything, Phillip."

"Exactly what Alasdair said."

"But you must do *exactly* what I tell you." Then they were jouncing up the narrow track too quickly to speak. At the top, she continued her instructions: "When we stop, we'll be going down a rough trail, a very rough trail. Even if we meet the Lamb more than once, don't be afraid. Be resolute and go straight on."

"I'll try."

"You must."

"Where will we be going?"

"A very old place." She turned to address Alasdair. "You think you can find the way to the Corbie Stane in the mirk?"

"Unless there's glamourie."

"Trust me to slice through that." In seeming illustration, she held up what looked like a pair of shears, but passed them back to Phillip. "These are to use when we're there. You need do naught save cut off a lock of your hair and put it on the stane."

"That's all?"

"That's enough."

"There's the kirk," said Alasdair, and as Phillip looked out to glimpse the dim ruins in the mist above, he realized that that could be more than enough if the Lamb stood in his way.

The shears were unusual, not steel but bronze green with age except for their new-honed edge, in the ancient rivetless design with the three-quarter circle spring on one end and the triangular blades beyond the handles on the other. Phillip wondered how many centuries had passed since they were forged.

He could feel a design or inscription on the sides of the blades, but it was too dark to guess what it might be.

Alasdair slowed, looking carefully ahead, then stopped. "I recognize the place. Now for a long walk."

Once out, Maud Morrison formed them into a tiny formation, Phillip at the point, but the others holding his arms from behind and shining torches ahead to show the way. "*You* must lead," she said. "Part of the ritual—I would if I could."

Alasdair pointed with his torch. "We go down here." The path dipped down to a burn no wider than a stride, an inky rushing in the night beside their feet.

Phillip stumped cautiously along the path in the swaying light, more concerned for their footing than his own, with them so careful to keep a hand on him from behind.

If the Lamb appeared now—

If the Lamb appears now, I'll kick it away so that they won't fall.

Then a gray glow shuddered into existence ahead. The Lamb stood in his path.

Phillip came to a paralyzed stop as the bleached eyes and skeletal jaw fixed on him. Thought stopped too, or turned round such a narrow point it was like stopping. *The Lamb, the Lamb, the Lamb.*

Phillip tottered, sick and empty. Finally he came out of it enough to

remember he'd said he'd kick the Lamb aside. That was beyond him, but he hobbled forward.

One step, and the Lamb was gone.

Phillip advanced, giggling and shaking.

Then the gray malevolent thing was waiting in the path again, and he found himself helpless as before.

The Lamb could wear him down.

He stepped forward and it vanished.

Ahead, the gray phosphorescence gathered again.

But Phillip went on. The Lamb flickered like a soap bubble, disappeared, and came back; he went on. It dissipated like smoke and returned. Phillip went on.

Finally, it seemed a little easier to march on against that chilling stare, but Phillip was stretched thin: the tendons were seizing up behind his knees and he had a tic below his left eye. Even now the Lamb could wear him down.

The world blurred; he staggered on, treading on Lamb after Lamb.

Vexilla regis prodeunt. Alasdair had been right to describe him as irreligious, but the words of Venantius Fortunatus' great hymn came to Phillip unbidden. "The banners of the King advance."

Another bony apparition confronted him. Phillip limped tiredly toward it, no braver than he was before.

"We're there."

Alasdair's announcement jarred him out of his nightmare progress. A rounded hillock loomed like a breast against the sky, too symmetrical to be natural, with a stone at the top instead of a nipple.

"Remember, all you have to do is cut off your hair," Maud Morrison said as they began to climb, "and lay it on the stone."

Then the Lamb appeared above them on the tumulus.

More than a flicker now, the gray light was a strong steady pulse, coming and going in deathly systole and diastole. The gray light *was* the Lamb, sneering down until the world twisted and the slope seemed perpendicular; there was no imaginable way to reach the top.

The Lamb bleated. Or was it laughter?

Phillip stumbled on the cold hillside, but his companions helped him on. The Lamb was just above—

Then they were face to face a yard apart, its eyes like gray nailheads in his heart, its noxious breath freezing his bones. He sank to one knee, could go no further, but Alasdair pushed at one elbow and he crawled forward, pushed himself upright, and the Lamb was gone.

Phillip staggered up and leaned against the waist-high Corbie Stane.

After a moment, he reached up and pulled a lock of hair out from his temple, lifted the shears, cut it.

He put the lock of hair on the stone. "That's all?

"That's all," Maud Morrison said, "except you don't look back this way once we start down."

"Why not?"

"It's supposed to be dangerous. No reason given, but why risk it?"

"Quite."

By the time they reached the Land Rover, Phillip was exhausted, and cradled his head in his arms in a corner of the rear seat, falling into a half-sleep as the vehicle rushed and swayed through the night.

Neither of them was able to tell Phillip anything more about the Shorn Lamb, though Mrs. Morrison nodded agreement when Alasdair said that even though this version of it was carved on a church, it had to go back much further than that. "After all, we exorcised it at a prehistoric tumulus."

"Why did it involve cutting off my hair?"

"That was a common thing in more than one religion."

"But wasn't that usually a sacrifice to the dead?"

Alasdair nodded. "And I'd like to know who or what's buried there."

"Might be you *wouldn't*," Maud Morrison said. "Might be you wouldn't!"

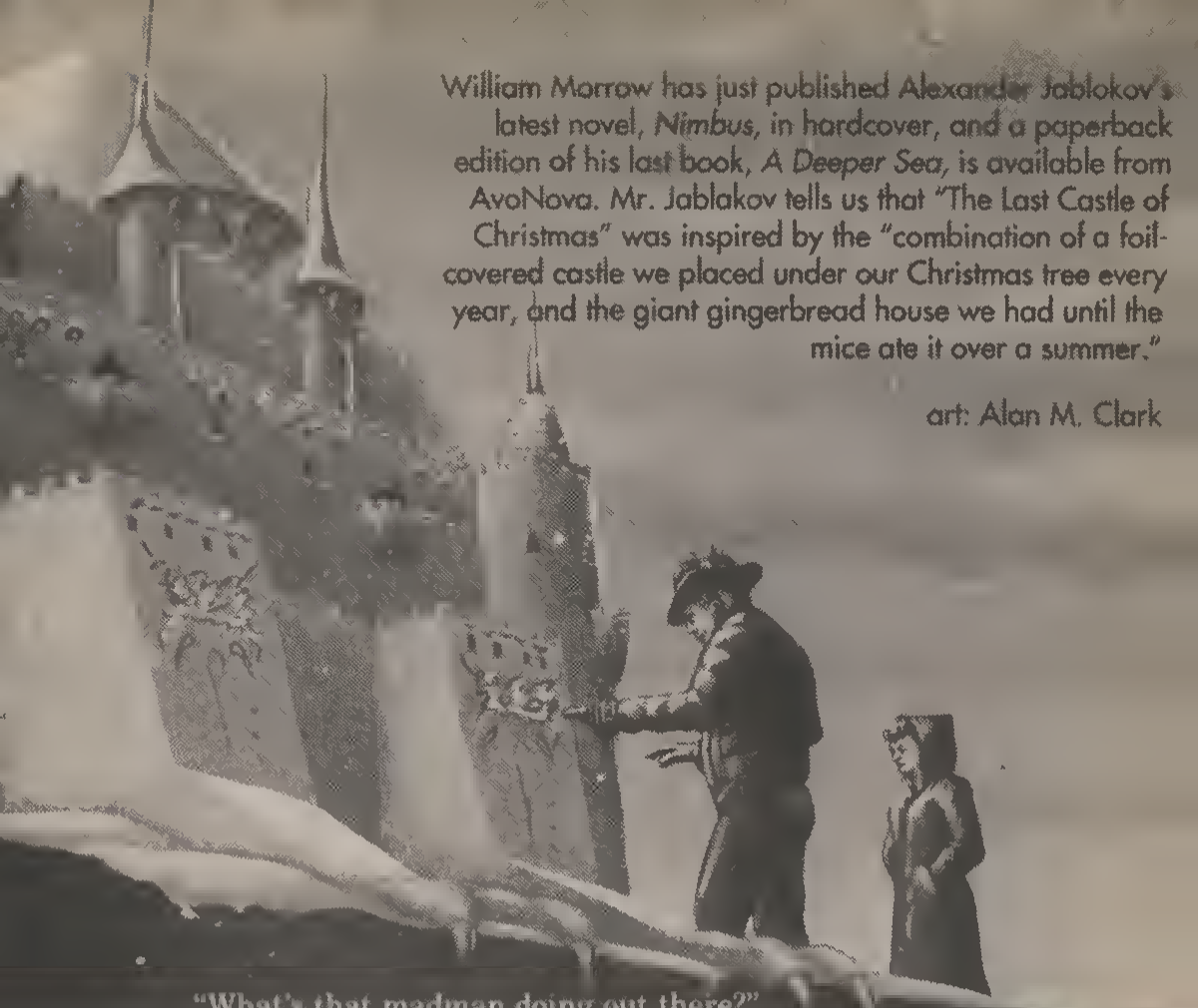
Phillip never saw the Lamb again, though once, in London, he came upon a large stuffed toy lamb unexpectedly in a shop window. After a moment, he laughed, but in a manner that made the others passing on the pavement give him a wide berth. ●

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THE LAST CASTLE OF CHRISTMAS



Alexander Jablokov



William Morrow has just published Alexander Jablokov's latest novel, *Nimbus*, in hardcover, and a paperback edition of his last book, *A Deeper Sea*, is available from AvoNova. Mr. Jablokov tells us that "The Last Castle of Christmas" was inspired by the "combination of a foil-covered castle we placed under our Christmas tree every year, and the giant gingerbread house we had until the mice ate it over a summer."

art: Alan M. Clark

"What's that madman doing out there?" Dalka asked, rousing herself from her half doze.

Tessa tugged the reins, slowing the wagon, and looked off through the last traces of morning ice mist. For a moment, nothing: the black-on-white of pipe plants, tulap trunks, insulated bundles of sprouting plants waiting for spring, the canyon wall rising beyond them. Then a single erect, flapping shape, sliding frantically across the ice of a pond.

"Ice skating, it looks like," Tessa said.

Dalka snorted. "His way of celebrating Christmas?"

"Maybe it is." Now that Tessa thought about it, it *was* disquieting. Old Man Lewis usually did not appear in the lower parts of the canyon so openly, even in winter. She'd known him all her life, so she knew when something disturbed him.

It was early morning and they were the first wagon down the road. A damp current had slid down from the high Shield during the night, and the twin ice rails were hidden by an unbroken blanket of flat ice crystals standing on end like scales evolving into feathers. The low-slung mule Legume crunched phlegmatically through them with its wide feet, tugging its burden easily along behind it. The insulating hide covering its back and vertebral spines, painstakingly applied by Tessa's brother Benjamin, gleamed in the early morning sunlight.



"Tessa!" Lewis's voice drifted across the wagon. "Tessa Wolholme." He windmilled his arms and fell flat on his back on the ice. Ice skates gleamed as he kicked his legs in the air.

"He wants you to celebrate with him." Dalka was contemptuous.

A gentle rein tug and the mule, splayed legs ungainly, bounced the wagon's runners out of the ice-filled ruts onto the sloping embankments. Huffing, somehow realizing that it had been granted an unexpected rest, Legume wiggled its bulging belly into the frost, stuck its head under a front leg, and was promptly asleep.

"Then I will," Tessa said. "Want to come along?"

She jumped out of the wagon. The older woman lowered her bulk after, grunting and complaining. Dalka and Tessa had spent the night in a high cleft, extracting physiologically active fractions from rare fungi. The fractionating procedure could have been carried out more easily in someone's kitchen, but Dalka held to a romantic tradition, and made it a part of Tessa's training.

Lewis lay sprawled on an irregularly shaped pond. It opened up for swimming in the summer, but densely packed leaves now closed in its surface, preserving carefully calibrated concentrations of salts and sugars. The pond was actually the bell of a subterranean flower, water storage for the dry period at the end of winter.

But pure water had seeped through the insulating leaves, and the pond was surfaced with ice. It always did, no matter how carefully the farmers grew the leaves and arranged their interlocking edges, leading Tessa to conclude that the leakage was deliberate on the part of the original plant breeders. Maybe it provided an extra seal. And maybe it was just for fun.

By the time Tessa got to Lewis, he was laughing.

"Ah, Miss Theresa Wolholme! You are too late to save me from falling. Years too late!" Lewis grinned at her, his eyes wide and blue. His white hair flopped around his head. With Tessa's help, he climbed to his feet, slipping on his skates. "That ice is cold good on the skin, ah? Keeps it tight aware against the bone." Lewis wore little under his black cloak, and Tessa could feel his sagging, stringy flesh. "Once you've seen a planet burned to death, cold makes more sense. Die with a chip of ice under your tongue, die relaxed and comfortable."

"You should get inside, Lewis," Dalka said, pleased by the unusual opportunity to play the part of conventional reason. "You look cold. The sky's clearing. The temperature will drop."

Lewis goggled at her. His hair was as white as hers, but in contrast to her carefully managed spray, his flew around like snow blown off the peak of Kardom.

"You should get *out*," he said. "Koola does not stay inside. Inside is somewhere else. Earth, maybe." His cloak flopped loosely, but he indeed



didn't seem cold. Legend had it that he curled up inside of snow drifts and ice caves for days-long naps. Even knowing him as she did, Tessa could not say that the rumors weren't true.

"I've *been* out," Dalka said irritably. "We were just coming back—" She stopped herself. Boasting to Lewis about anything to do with the defiles and cliffs surrounding Calrick's Bend was as pointless as showing a bird how high you can jump. She turned her attention to the winter-hooded herbs at the pond's edge, searching for something rare and unusual to make her visit worthwhile.

"Are you all right, Lewis?" Tessa looked into his eyes, but they were the same guileless blue as always.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm always all right. But the others—how is your father now?"

Tessa felt a moment of sadness at the question. Had it really been so long since Lewis and her father Perin had spoken? After all the years and the bonds between them?

"He's been well . . . but not the same. Not since my mother died."

"Ah, Sora. She was once his anchor. Now, you."

"You should come see him." In her younger days, Tessa would have been wary of offering such advice. Lewis was her father's wild friend, not subject to ordinary laws. When she was ten, Lewis told her and her brothers to climb the rocks naked, to feel the strength of their planet, Koola, right through their skin. She and Dom, her older brother, had stripped down and done it, to be hauled off by their furious mother and sent to their rooms. Lewis's only response was to suggest trying it a bit farther from the house.

"Perin doesn't need me," Lewis said. "He has his own way."

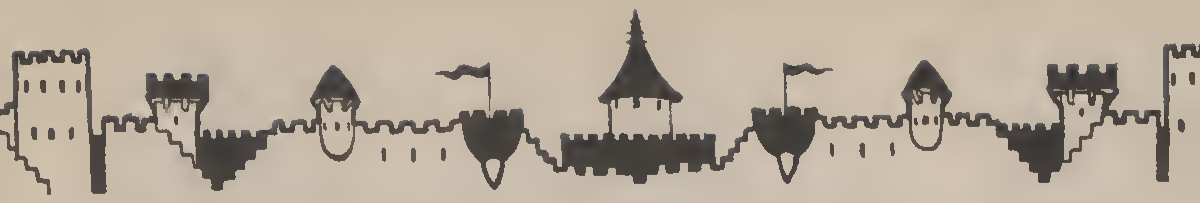
"You should see him." Tessa had waited for Lewis to appear at the house in the days after her mother's death. He never did, as if his old comrade's marriage and family were something insignificant, a mere bad habit. Lewis was not interested in anything that gave life comfort. But Tessa now lived with the look in her father's eyes, and if Old Man Lewis could be tamed enough to do something, she would try it.

He didn't answer her. He looked at something behind her, hard enough that she finally turned to look herself. A tiny girl had appeared in the frost-bitten field. Her head was bundled in a thick scarf, but the ends were flopping loose, not tucked into the collar of her coat.

"Hello, Malena," Dalka said, straightening up from her herbs. "What are you doing out?"

"I'm running an errand," the girl said in a high, firm voice. "Mama wants some reeds for the fire. For the cake, the castle. We're cooking it tonight."

"A small one, this year?"



"Very small." Malena Merewin was serene about the possibility. "But big enough for the Kings to stay for Christmas night. They're not proud, my father says. They'll stop if they need to."

"That's good, Malena."

Malena moved around the pond pulling up bundled reeds. She may have been going a little beyond the strict definition of permitted gleaning, but no one was about to protest. It was before Christmas, the trespasser a little girl, and the Merewins were poor. Tessa knew that she would be visiting their house tomorrow, on Christmas morning, towed there by Alta Dalhousie and the other charitable women of Cooperset Canyon.

Lewis continued to watch the little girl. She didn't acknowledge his presence openly, but stood close by him, and touched his cloak. Lewis knew Malena's father, Gorr Merewin, the same way as he knew Tessa's father Perin: they had all fought in the wars together, were all veterans of that desperate fight in the Simurad tunnels on a planet far from Koola. And each bore his own individual scars from that fight.

But why was the girl's scarf so loose? Her mother was starting to lose her grip. When children weren't taken care of, things were almost over.

"Come here," Tessa said. The little girl obediently marched up to her and stared up into her face. Her eyes had a stern wisdom that no five-year-old should have had, but her favorite doll still stuck its limp-necked head out of a pocket of her jacket. Her thick dark hair had come unbraided. It was cold, and Tessa did not have time to redo the braids, though she was tempted to take Malena home and do a decent job of it. She compromised by taking a couple of clips out of her own hair to provide some control. She tucked the head scarf into Malena's coat and buttoned it back up.

The little girl had continued staring solemnly at Tessa all through the operation. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Don't blame my momma," she said. "Don't blame my momma."

Tessa, who did blame Malena's momma, put her arms around her. "It's all right, Malena. Wish your mother a good Christmas from Tessa Wolholme, and tell her I'll see her tomorrow."

The little girl caught her breath. "We're all right!" she shouted. "Don't come, we don't need you! Please." She backed away, still staring at Tessa. "Momma and poppa and I . . . we all live together. We always will. Don't try it!" And then she was running, with the frantic inefficient energy of a child, up the hill.

"She's halfway there," Lewis announced. "She's halfway to Koola."

"Please, Lewis," Tessa said, feeling a flash of fear, which she masked with anger. "She's a little girl."

"None of us is old enough to make the decisions we need to." Lewis



squatted and removed his skates. He stepped out onto the ice with bare feet and stared challengingly at Tessa.

"Look at this," Dalka said. "Houndsfoot." She stood up with a tiny curled plant. "It contains a useful anthelmintic. You know how mules pick up worms from winter forage. You need a lot more than this to get a useful dose, but it might be interesting for you to examine. . . ."

Tessa allowed herself to be led away by the voluble Dalka, while Lewis slid thoughtfully on the ice in his bare feet, looking up at the snow-outlined canyon cliffs above.

Tessa slid the wagon into its slot and undid the mule. Legume, despite its unexpected nap earlier, crawled gratefully into its subterranean burrow, flicked its forked tongue out to taste the air, and promptly fell asleep again. Tessa could hear a low hum as it twisted around, seeking a comfortable position amid the sweet-smelling hummocks of lungfungus. The mule shared its quarters with the farm's bees during the winter, each providing the other with heat and, Tessa supposed, company. Tessa made sure there was enough dried herbage for it to eat when it woke again. The lungfungus, supplemented by beeswax, was supposed to be its sole diet, but for some reason Legume demanded fermented sweet herbs from the kitchen garden as a condiment. Her older brother Dom told Tessa that it was because she had spoiled the thing when she was a girl. At any rate, if the finicky Legume didn't get its borage and sweetsage with its fungus, it would climb out of its burrow and bellow its displeasure to the chef.

The Wolholme house itself climbed the canyon wall. Like many houses in Calrick Bend, it grew larger the higher up it went, supported by a tangle of trusses and brackets. It was made of wood and sheet plaster and was brightly painted red and blue and green. A dark pile of moss against the canyon wall nearby puffed smoke into the cold air. Tessa could see her father, Perin, bustling around, making sure the oven was supplied with the right air mixture to cook the cake walls without drying them out.

A large open area had been cleared near the tool sheds for the castle. Tessa's youngest brother Kevin knelt on the ground, playing with a toy wagon. His coat was unbuttoned, but he didn't seem to mind the cold. With avid concentration, he picked up any stray twigs or pieces of dry grass he found on the cleared area, loaded them into the tiny wagon, and hauled them over to a dump he was managing at the edge. The toy mule was apparently based on Legume, because it often refused to behave, necessitating whispered lectures to the tiny resin figurine. He hunched over his task, his back narrow, small boy butt stuck into the air.

Tessa couldn't stand it. She swooped down and picked him up, holding



him easily over her head. He was heavier than he had been when she came back from Perala after the death of her mother, but she was stronger, too. She would see how long she could maintain the advantage.

"Hey!" He squirmed. "Put me down. I'm working!"

She laughed. "What are you doing?"

"It's important. We're going to build a castle! So I have to *work*."

Tessa hugged him, kissed him, and set him back down to his task. Once free, he grabbed her legs. "It's going to be the biggest castle in Calrick Bend! I'm going to help Poppa build it." Kevin was slyly confiding. "He needs my help."

"He needs all our help," Tessa replied. She looked over at the massive, hunch-shouldered figure of her father as he used a shovel to open up the moss-covered oven. His movements had grown more deliberate since his wife Sora's death, as if he was moving against a great resistance. "Where are Dom and Benjamin?"

"Hunting!" Kevin sat down and ran the mule and wagon back and forth on the ground until he had dug a groove. He looked up at Tessa. "I couldn't go."

"You have work to do."

"I do!"

He once again bent over his wagon, the rest of the world forgotten. Tessa started toward her father, though she knew he regarded the baking of the castle as entirely his own task, without any need of outside assistance. She just wanted to see him up close, to make sure he was all right.

There was the crunch of heavy footsteps behind her, as her brothers Dom and Benjamin strode into the yard. Their pants were frosted below the knee. Dom carried a dead telena across his shoulders. Blood from its mouth had dripped down his chest. Benjamin, not yet full grown, had had to be content with carrying both of their sling darts and the rest of their equipment. They both had the weary and joyful glaze-eyed look of men who had hunted successfully. Dom knelt, slung the telena off his back with a relieved grunt, and lowered the creature to the ground.

"So, Tessa," he said. "Been out chopping herbs with Dalka again?"

His tone was idly teasing, but recently his teasing had taken on an arrogant edge. A month before he had gone on a trading expedition to Perala with some of the other men, to negotiate purchase contracts for the next year's crops. As far as she knew, Dom had played no great role, but you couldn't tell that from his attitude.

"I finished all my work before I left." Tessa had meant to sound merely matter-of-fact, but the tone of resentment was distinct.

"I didn't say you hadn't." Dom fussed with the dead animal, as if its limbs needed to be arranged in some aesthetic way before being carried in to be cut up and hung to age in the shed.



"He didn't see it!" Benjamin was overjoyed. "It stood right above him, and he didn't see it."

"I was too busy making sure you didn't fall into the ravine, like you did last summer."

Dom was annoyed with himself. Tessa could see that. Ben was growing up, getting faster, smarter. Dom had had a long time to have things to himself.

"Here, Tessa." Dom slapped the telena's flank. "Can you help me with this thing?" He smiled up at her.

It was a typical Dom gesture. She could carry something heavy and get blood on her clothes to prove to Dom that they were still friends. The dead animal had curved yellow tusks at its muzzle and slender, triple-toed legs. It was a native of Koola, unlike many of the other creatures of the cliffs. Its eyes were open and staring, its blue tongue was hanging out, and it didn't look peacefully dead, not at all.

The fermenthouse was above Legume's burrow. They tied the telena's legs together and wrestled it up onto a hook. It would hang there until internal enzymes had dissolved most of the carcass's connective tissue, at which time the animal would be cut up and properly stored.

"Dom," Tessa said. She had adroitly avoided all the blood while still doing her full share of the work and felt more pleased with herself than that simple achievement justified. "Can you think of any reason why Lewis would come down out of the high canyons?"

"This time of year?" Dom sniffed. The air in the shed was thick with calculated decay, ferment, and aging. Wheels of cheese were stacked in the corner, just below tightly wrapped haunches from earlier in the year. "No."

One of Dom's more frustrating virtues was his ability to state an opinion without needing to qualify it.

"I saw him, skating on a pond. Up the station road."

"Skating? Where did he get skates?"

That was a mystery that Tessa hadn't even thought of. Lewis was not a man with many possessions.

"Maybe he's down to see Poppa," Dom said hopefully. He had been as hurt by Lewis's neglect since their mother's death as anyone. "It's Christmas, after all. Maybe he just wants to see the castle."

"I don't think so, Dom. I think it's something else."

Dom shrugged. "Then we'll have to wait until he makes it clear. If he ever does."

"Let's go," Tessa said with a sigh. "I have some cooking to do."

"All right. Pull it over, pull it over. That's it . . . no, to the right a little. Good!" Perin, normally tentative, was in his true element: building. He



had secretly planned the castle for months, arranging and rearranging its features. Easygoing the rest of the time, during construction he became tyrannical in traditional paternal style. "No, no! You want to snap those ramparts in half? Be gentle."

"Sorry," Benjamin puffed, as he slid a decorated, buttressed wall into its proper place. Sugar paste cemented it. He stood and contemplated his work, licking his fingers.

"Come on. We're not half-done yet."

The castle-cake smelled vividly of spice. Still warm from the ovens, it steamed slightly in the fading light of afternoon. Its upper towers were higher than Tessa was tall. When she paused in her work, she could hear the faint popping of carwa seeds within the walls. They were always baked into the cake. The heat of the oven and the acid of the stabilizers in the dough cracked the tough shells of the off-world seeds so that, next spring, they would sprout all over the fields, where the animals had carried them.

"That's enough, Kevin," Tessa said. "You'll dissolve it completely."

Kevin guiltily snatched the sugar-crystal window from his mouth and stuck it in the appropriate opening. Tessa picked one up herself and tentatively touched her tongue to it, feeling a guilty pleasure: cloying sweetness, just cut by the tartness of the binder. Despite herself, she found herself licking it. It was an unacknowledged privilege of the labor, the bits and pieces of the construction snuck into eager mouths. She remembered working with Dom and Benjamin, when Ben had been just a child Kevin's size, and the way they would frost every single castle window with their tongues. Their mother, Sora, had been there to supervise them then, indulging and disciplining with fine distinctions. She was there no longer. Tessa sometimes found herself doing some small thing wrong, so that she could turn and hear her mother's calm reprimand. No words, scolding or caring, ever came.

Tessa sighed. Kevin was munching on a piece of the crenelations that would top the castle wall. She decided to leave him alone. Things were hard enough.

"Poppa," Tessa said, coming up behind her father as he finished the elaborate sugar-and-spice decorations on one side of the castle. "What should I know about you and Old Man Lewis?"

Her father grunted. "He's not so old, Tessa. Not much older than me."

"I saw him this morning. He was ice skating on a pond. Malena Merewin was gathering rushes."

Perin paused for a long moment, considering. Tessa held her breath. There were times when he talked, and times when he didn't, and he became shy if pressed too hard. So she let him fuss with his decorations,



making sure they were ready and arranged before he tackled the next wall.

"Lewis loves the cold. Not so much for what it is, but for what it isn't. Cold is not fire. Lewis has had too much fire in his life." He started spraying substrate over the hard-cake wall that surrounded the castle's triumphal entry gate. "When I met Lewis he was lying on the ground. A rock had fallen on him. A subterranean explosion, shock waves . . . there was rubble all over. We were in a tunnel, under Simurad, on the planet Trasach. Dark, underground. I was bleeding myself, a rock had hit the side of my head." He rubbed his hair. "I can still feel the lump. Here."

Tessa put her hand up to it. His hair was rough and thick. Tessa, to her dismay, had inherited it, rather than her mother's finer tresses. The lump swelled out along the left side of his head. She'd felt it every time she climbed on his shoulders when she was a little girl, and had heard the story.

"I pulled the rock up. Fire was all around. Someone helped me rescue Lewis: Gorr Merewin. And so we met, three farmers from the Eastern Shield, somewhere we should never have been."

Perin wore the cylinder of the sprayer strapped to his right wrist. He moved his lower arm delicately, manipulating the nozzle controls with his fingers. Precise ornaments appeared, garlands, swags, the skulls of unknown horned animals.

"We were a mixed company, from all over Koola. That in itself was educational. I never understood the arrangement, really. It was all done far over our heads. All any of us were really concerned with was getting back to our homes."

"All three of you made it."

"Parts of us did." He stepped to the right and created a line of grotesque faces, their cheeks bulging out comically as they tried to blow the viewer off the face of the planet.

"Poppa. Lewis and Gorr—"

"We all helped each other, here in Cooperset Canyon as well as there at war. Lewis . . . well, you know Lewis." Perin smiled to himself. Lewis had tried to help raise the children, to Sora's dismay, advising them on how to slide down into ice caves and put frogs into their mouths so they knew how it felt to be a swamp. The children had taken or rejected his mad advice, but had somehow never had trouble seeing the concern that lay behind it.

"And you know Gorr as well. At least you did." Gorr Merewin was different. The flames of Simurad had scorched some part of his soul, leaving him bleakly silent, always angry. "He and I have not spoken for five years."



Perin had always gone out to Gorr, not the other way around, and Tessa, who had been frightened of that dark man, had not troubled to find out what they did or talked about together, or why they had finally stopped.

"Why not?"

"His anger grew too great. It sprouted there, in Simurad, but somehow never stopped growing. And poor Malena. She is the creation of that anger. So Lewis has come down out of his mountains to watch over her. Dear Lewis." With his left hand, he trailed glowing stars and spheres into the setting sugar. The cake castle, already elaborate, took on another layer of fantasy. "Poor, dear Lewis. He's doing his duty, as always. I shall have to do my part too."

Tessa, as always, had no doubt that it was the finest castle in all of upper Cooperset Canyon. Perin hunched over it, as he always did over a task, and hummed to himself, his daughter forgotten.

"Poppa—"

When he looked at her, his eyes were distant. "Something's happened. I don't know what. Only Lewis does. Whatever it is, we'll take care of Malena." It was a simple statement of fact, his duty to Gorr.

"Yes, Poppa." She paused. "Will you be in soon?"

"Just a moment. There's just a few more things I have to do. Then it will be ready."

"I don't trust him," Dalka said, sitting down by the stove. "He doesn't fit."

Tessa wasn't interested in discussing Dalka's suspicions of Old Man Lewis. Dalka had made them clear enough in the past.

"Gorr Merewin served with Poppa and Lewis in the war. About five years ago he got married to Fila. . . ." About the time Gorr and Perin had ceased communication.

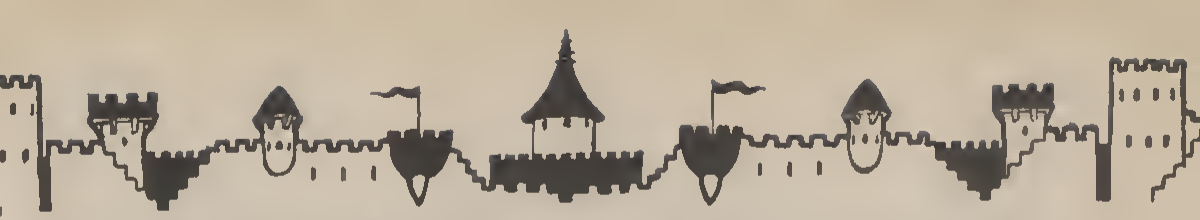
"Ah, Gorr and Fila! They went and misbehaved, and that girl Malena is the unfortunate result." Dalka clucked her tongue.

After slicing the roast in a crisscross pattern with a sharp knife, Tessa misted the skin so that it would crisp up, and closed the oven. Dalka made Perin uncomfortable, but he still felt obliged to invite her to Christmas dinner, in homage to his dead wife, whose friend she had been.

"Yes, a sad story—you know, Tessa, if you had put dried quince under the skin, it would have made the meat more tender, and given it a tang."

"Yes, Dalka." Tessa pulled the top off the soup pot and checked the spices. The stew was mellowing down nicely, each sturdy winter vegetable giving its insistent piquancy to the whole.

"You might add some more winter basil," Dalka said, sniffing the air.



"The turnips tend to absorb its flavor, so there's not enough in the stock when you're done. You've probably been tasting it too much to tell that."

Tessa controlled a surge of irritation and tore some leaves off the plants that grew over the sink. "Gorr and Fila . . ."

"They married for love," Dalka said. "He kidnapped her—so her family called it—from her father's house. And who knows? She might not have been entirely willing, at that. She was already pregnant with Malena at the time. She'd refused to take my advice—and paid the price for that." Dalka managed the fertility of the women of Calrick Bend, and took the responsibility seriously. Tessa had already had several lectures from her. Fila's refusal to take sensible advice obviously put her beyond the pale. "Some time later Gorr and Fila's brother Swern Toroma fought. Swern lost the use of his hand. I worked on it, but something blocked nerve regrowth, I got a lot of axonal degeneration. He went to a surgeon, got it stiffened up so he can use it to support things."

Swern Toroma wore a glove on the stiffly splayed fingers of his hand, covered with tool hooks and attachments. He acted as if he was proud of the thing, but then, what else could he do?

"And Gorr got that scar across his face," Tessa said. Rumor was, Fila had put it there defending her brother. Gorr concealed it with high collars and hoods, but even Tessa had caught a glimpse of it across his jaw, swelling purple. "It's not a normal scar. . . ."

Dalka's face went cold. "Oh, isn't it?"

"Dalka!" Tessa felt a chill at her anger. Her mother, she felt with sudden loss, was gone. Without Dalka, who would she have to talk to? Even if she was at times unpredictable. "It's important to me. Something's wrong, with the Merewins, with Malena . . . I have to know."

"Oh, do you?" Dalka was not mollified. She undid the top of a ceramic container and dipped herself a mug of spicy kitchen beer, a prerogative of cooks and their helpers, moving slowly, building tension. "Why?"

"The Merewins work the land under Pakor Spur," Tessa said. She hadn't been ready to speak her thoughts, and she fumbled at the words. "It was Carlyn land, before. It comes through Fila's family, the Toromas. Her father settled it on Fila before she ran off with Gorr. Or was kidnapped, whatever."

In the past six months, she had intensely studied the patterns of land use throughout upper Cooperset and adjoining drainages. The interrelationships were complex, and not entirely comprehensible, but she felt that she was starting to get some sort of grip on it. No one could work entirely independently, unconcerned with the behavior of his neighbors.

At the root of the Cooperset farming ecology was the network of pipe plants through which flowed, from field to field, what had once been the Cooperset River. All worked together for the common good, not because



of some high-minded realization of emotional interdependence but because the system would fall apart if they didn't. Everyone, from the highest Dalhousie to the lowest Trepak in the huts down by Brant Spur, knew this and donated their labor. Refusal to participate was the one unforgivable sin.

"If something has happened to Gorr and Fila . . ."

"Why do you think something has?" Dalka was sharp. "They keep to themselves. And their daughter always wanders around the canyon. We've all seen her, we all know to watch out for her." Dalka shook her head. "Too much love between a man and a woman can squeeze their child out. It's a crime, an indecency."

"Lewis . . . don't make that face, Dalka, I grew up with him, he took care of me, of all of us, in his own way. And that's why he's down here, standing out in the open where you can see him from the road: he's down to watch after Malena, as he would be to look after us if something happened to Poppa. And if something has happened to the Merewins, well, then Malena becomes our responsibility, that of the Wolholmes."

"Along with her land?" Dalka seemed almost amused. "What about Swern Toroma?"

"He can't manage that land. That's clear to everyone. And so he can't take care of Malena." Tessa didn't need to temporize or conceal with Dalka. "Managing that land would help the Wolholmes survive. You know how hard my mother worked."

"I do, dear. And I think she would be proud to see you now."

"Oh, Dalka." Tessa blinked and felt the tears wet her eyelashes. "It's so hard, and I'm so afraid. What will happen to us? What will we do?"

"Hush, dear. Here, help with this, we should be getting it ready." Tessa leaned near Dalka's comforting bulk, and together they filled a platter with cooked vegetables, arranging their different colors in an intricate pattern. "What do you know about Gorr's scar?"

Tessa held her breath until she thought she could speak without her voice quavering. "Not much. But I overheard one of the Merewins' neighbors, Lessa Tergoran, describe Gorr's scar. She laughed at herself, said she was getting old, but she really thought it moved around, that it was never in the same place she had seen it before."

"Lessa Tergoran's an old gossip," Dalka said. "Don't encourage her, whatever you do. Your life will never be your own again. No one receives gossip without paying a price for it."

"Dalka. Fila cut Gorr, didn't she? To defend her brother, whatever. And she tipped the blade with—"

"Shh!" Dalka's eyes darted to the door. The men would soon be in to eat. "Be careful, Tessa."

"Tell me!"



"She should never have done it. It's an old piece of knowledge, almost forgotten, intended for marking animals, for making a brand without wrestling with the beast." A few still herded, Tessa knew, up on the step plateaus leading to the Boss, but no longer in the canyons. It was a precarious, severe existence. "It's a self-sustaining fungus infection of the basal layer of the dermis."

"She coated the knife with it!" She was half horrified, half delighted.

"Be quiet, please!"

"But why, Dalka? What did she say she wanted it for when she asked for it?"

Dalka looked disgusted. "Small doses of it tone up the skin, get rid of unwanted hair. Fila said she needed it, for her husband's sake. To be more beautiful for him."

"For her husband's sake. Did she plan it, do you suppose? Or did she just have it around and decide to use it on the spur of the moment?"

"I have no idea, Theresa," Dalka said. "I just know that she did, finally, use it. It's there, under his skin. It should stay in the epidermis, above the blood and lymphatic vessels, but her blade infected the vascularized dermis. The infection shifts sometimes, colonizing new areas. I'm surprised it hasn't spread and killed him. It will do that in human beings. It wasn't designed for them. I guess he's been lucky. He'll always have it. Something to remember her by."

The Merewin house was isolated, hanging in a shattered side crack of Cooperset Canyon. Tessa imagined them living there, the two of them, with their tiny daughter. She realized that, much as she thought she knew, she didn't really understand what went on with people. That savage coupling, a woman mutilating her husband's face but staying with him, and he agreeing to it. She wondered if she ever would understand it.

Tessa pulled the roast out of the oven. The golden skin had crisped and pulled away from the rose-colored flesh, her slashes forming the vivid network pattern of a proper Christmas feast. She undid the twine holding the legs to the body and pulled them out to their full length. It looked ready to jump.

"Come with me, tomorrow, for the Christmas visits. I'm going out with Alta Dalhousie."

Dalka made a face. "Alta? She makes me tired. I don't even know how she persuaded me to help make her the center of attention Christmas morning. You know the way she comes to the door with a question and ends up in the kitchen eating your bread? Eventually you find yourself baking it at her house, filling Dalhousia with the smells that belong in your own kitchen. You be careful with her."

"I need you, Dalka. We're going to be visiting the Merewins."



"Oho, it's like that, is it?" Dalka chortled. "Check them out while being philanthropic. But why take Alta along? She has her own interests, you know."

"I know. So I might as well have her with me from the beginning. Without her help, and the help of the Dalhousies, I don't know if I could win a fight with Swern Toroma."

"What did you tell her?"

Tessa shrugged. "That I wanted to go up Pakor Spur, to make it easier for me to collect the baskets after, since we're so near."

"Such a polite girl, that Tessa Wolhome is." Dalka was delighted. "Willing to help Alta Dalhousie look her best. Ah, dear, I will go. You underestimate her, but you're doing well. I'll go."

Tessa arranged the massive top frog on the platter, surrounding it with greenery. She thought back to the previous spring, when this frog and all its brethren were still tiny peeping creatures, starting their season-long climb up the tulap trees to the vines on top. This one had probably hopped across her foot with beady-eyed intentness shortly after her mother's death.

"Let's go out and light the candles," Tessa said. "Then we can come back inside and eat."

The castle glowed in the night, a candle in each of its many windows. Everyone else had gone to bed, but Tessa couldn't sleep. Or rather, she hadn't even tried, but sat up instead going over a part of her mother's fossil collection.

Families had strolled through Calrick Bend to look at the castles in the night, as was traditional. The castles were ostensibly built as a stopping place, a caravanserai, for the Traveling Kings, as they searched the endless stars for their Messiah, born but not yet found. Each family had one, some small and simple, some ridiculously elaborate, so that the Kings could freely choose. Perin's was a fine demonstration of his architectural skill, and was one of the most popular every year. A steady procession had come through the yard to examine the high ramparts, the soaring towers, the elaborately decorated screening walls. Children ran up and peered through the sugar windows at the interior passages, then ran back to their parents, who offered Perin their congratulations.

Tessa had paid more than ordinary attention to the parents and children gathering in the yard, but had seen no sign of Malena and the Merewins. She might have missed them, she thought to herself. The yard was crowded and she'd been busy. She might well have missed them.

Now Tessa stared into the darkness, her breath steaming, indecisively balanced at the door. She'd have to close it soon, they were losing too



much heat, but she somehow didn't feel ready to find her coat and put it on.

Her mother Sora had always kept vigil out there by the castle. It was an old habit of hers, a tribute to her husband. Heavy shawl across her shoulders, she would walk slowly around the castle, no matter how cold it was, and admire it, for even as it was finished, it began to vanish. Animals came from beneath the fields to devour the highly edible thing: the long, elaborately spike-scaled legged snakes that dug through the soil and lived in the tulap tree roots, the field mice, the lumbering, hard-shelled land crabs, all of them in some way necessary to the functioning of the farm ecology. The castles provided them with food during the coldest and harshest months of winter, food without which they could not have survived in adequate numbers to do their work during the growing season. The castle would slowly slump down into the ground until, by the warm days of spring, when it was completely gone, the shoots of the carwa plants came up through the earth in all the fields, marking the start of planting.

Tessa gasped. A dark figure was walking slowly around the castle. But that was ridiculous. It was obviously not her mother. Taller and about twice as wide, to start with. It was her brother, Dom. And he wasn't looking at the castle, but out into the surrounding darkness, as if waiting for someone's approach.

He would be annoyed to find that she had been watching without letting him know he was being observed.

"Dom!" she said.

He gestured: come out. She grabbed her coat, feeling the cold lick at her chest and neck as she ran out into the yard still tugging it on.

"When I was little," Dom said, "Kevin's age, I would sit up and watch for the Traveling Kings. Not just because they would leave me presents, though I liked that, but because I was convinced they would come by Poppa's castle, pause . . . and go in to take a rest, since they were so tired from their years of searching. They'd be gone by morning of course, wouldn't stay for breakfast, but I wanted to see them." He looked at her. "And I was always annoyed with Momma for walking around out here. They'd see her, I knew, and go somewhere else for the night."

Tessa looked up past him. High up on the left was Kevin's window, lit by the dim glow of his night light. Was that his little head, peering down at them, worried that their unnecessary presence would frighten the Kings off, cause them to go elsewhere? There wasn't enough light to tell.

"If you'd told her, she would have stayed inside," Tessa said. "She wouldn't have wanted to scare them away."

Dom hunched gloomily in his coat. "That's true. I was always so mad at her for not realizing."



"I always wondered what you were looking at. You wouldn't tell me, and even got mad that I was asking."

"Well," Dom said. "It wasn't any of your business, little sister."

They took a turn around the castle together, just as Sora would have. Its battlements gleamed in the darkness. Dark shapes ran at the edges of their vision. To Dom and Tessa, the sight was comforting, for the appearance of these usually subterranean creatures was the first sign of the approach of the distant spring.

"I didn't want to talk about it at the table," Dom said, "but there's something I want to tell you."

Tessa knew better than to prod. Dom was giving her information to help her make a decision, and he didn't like it, feeling it should be the other way around.

"In Perala . . . you remember it, from when you were at school."

"Yes, I do." Tessa had studied at Hammerswick Academy in Perala for a year before Sora's death had brought her back to Calrick Bend, perhaps forever. She usually thought about it only late at night.

"Well, we Cooperset men were all there, and the men from the lowlands. We got good prices . . . some of the valleys west of here have had bad storms and crop damage . . . Gorr Merewin was there. So was Swern Toroma."

"How is Swern's hand?"

Dom grimaced. "Not any better after the trip. Swern and Gorr came to a fight. They always do, other people told me. It's like a regular part of the trip, that one picks a quarrel. But this one . . . Swern mentioned Lewis. That's what started it."

"They fought because of Lewis? What did Swern say?"

Dom shrugged uncomfortably. "I wasn't really paying much attention. Too much else going on . . ." He paused for a long moment. "To tell you the truth, I was drunk."

Tessa laughed, delighted by his embarrassment. "It's part of your job, Dom. Negotiations always give you a hangover. Remember when Poppa would come back, his face all green, and Momma would put him to bed for a day?"

"Yes." The memory didn't seem to comfort him.

"But it's important, what Swern said."

"I told you, I wasn't paying much attention. But it was something about Lewis and Fila. And some infection. Gorr's sick, Fila treats him, Lewis helps . . hell, I didn't understand it, but Gorr sure did. Took a swipe at him, right at dinner. Food flying all over. Took the rest of us to hold them both down, and the lowlanders were right there, watching the canyon people beat each other up. Part of the fun for them."



"Ah," Tessa said. "That's interesting, though I don't know what it means."

Dom looked at her, his gaze sharp. "You have some plan, right? I can see it. You're smart, Tessa. We all know that. But smart isn't everything. In Calrick Bend, I'm not even sure it's much important. You went off to school, so maybe you've forgotten that."

He was trying to be helpful, but his tone grated on her nerves. The family needed protecting, and he resented her trying to do it. She could see that.

"Dom—"

He raised a hand. "You're going to be mad at me. I can tell from your eyebrows. I'm sorry. I just wanted you to know. . . ." He took her arm as they walked. "I just wanted you to know that you can count on us. All of us. If you need to. Me, Benjamin . . . Kevin too. Him most of all. He'd do anything for you. I was just trying to say that. But I don't talk good. I never have, have I?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're talking pretty good now."

Dom was embarrassed. "Okay. Just promise me one thing. Whenever you make a decision, try to imagine that you're only half as smart as you really are."

She smiled. "I'll give it a try."

Tessa slept little that night, and was up with the sun in the morning. Kevin was already circling the wrapped presents. His takings would be small enough this year, but he would make the most of it.

"Where are you going?" he said.

She gathered up her things and put on her coat. "I'll be back soon."

"But where are you *going?*"

"To Alta Dalhousie's. We're going to visit the poor families with food."

He sat on the floor and pouted. "You won't be here to open your presents. Wait until you see what I got you." He dug through the pile.

"I'll be back soon, Kevin. It's my job, now that Momma's gone. I have to go."

He pulled out something that looked like a forked tree limb wrapped in layers and layers of silver foil. Taking it from him, Tessa realized that that was exactly what it was.

"Open it!"

"Kevin, let's wait until—"

"Open it!"

She knew an irresistible command when she heard one. She pulled at the frenziedly taped foil, tight and thick as if the package were to be buried as a message to future generations, and finally managed to get it open.



The crotched limb had delicate, peeling-back bark, somewhat compressed by Kevin's packaging, and was bright with red, blue, and orange patches of lichen. Tessa wondered if any of them were of medicinal or enzymatic value. She'd have to ask Dalka.

"It's beautiful, Kevin," she said. Indeed it was. Of all the fallen branches in Cooperset Canyon, this was no doubt the best. He had probably taken a great deal of time over it. She thought it would look perfectly fine on a shelf in the room containing Sora's fossils.

"It's full of borer beetles!" he said gleefully. "I'm sure they'll come out when it gets warm. I like the way they wiggle their heads."

She looked more closely at it. The bark was pierced by countless tiny holes. If she set it on a shelf in the warm house, they would awaken early and come swarming out, to devour the furniture.

"Oh, Kevin. . . ."

Fortunately, at that moment Benjamin appeared, blinking in his pajamas, hair a mess, looking desperately young.

" 'Morning, Tessa," he said, "Where is everybody?"

"I'm in here making breakfast," Dom called from the kitchen. "Poppa's up, Kevin's making trouble, and Tessa's going to be late for her appointment if she doesn't hurry."

"I'm not making trouble!"

Benjamin sat in a chair and Kevin climbed into his lap. Benjamin patted his brother's head. "Trouble's what you're best at."

Tessa winked and ran out the door. The landscape was frosted and silent. The mountains loomed overhead, the white dusting on their shoulders giving them extra dignity. Castles stood by their houses, proud battlements, towers, flags, and arches gaily proclaiming the holiday. Tessa followed a path she had known since childhood, a twisting way around storage barns, over fences, under hedges. Burrs stuck to her coat, and a few dried leaves got into her hair. She dirtied her stockings jumping over a narrow ravine. In their younger days Dom had always beaten her at it despite her most strenuous efforts. Now it was easy. She enjoyed it so much she jumped back and did it again.

The Dalhousie house was high and proud. Most of it had been designed by her father, Perin, in his most exuberant style, a style he could not possibly afford for his own dwelling.

Tessa passed through the front hall, which stretched up three stories to the balcony of the upper bedrooms, and into the back dining room, crowded with women readying themselves for their charitable exercises. They made room for her at a table, poured her tea, asked about her family, praised Perin's castle.

"Margen's hiding upstairs," Zabeth Trasker told her, "peeking over the balcony. I think he's waiting for *you*."



Several of the other women tittered. Tessa was of marriageable age, and had, as yet, not made any indication of her preferences. Margen Dalhousie was a possible mate for her, as she had known since they were both children.

"More likely he's waiting for Mark," Tessa said. This caused more amusement. Zabeth's son, one of the few other eligible males in Calrick Bend, was notorious for his dreamy lateness.

Tessa kept a good face on it, but it took effort. The Wolholmes were in a difficult situation, and, in a sense, it was her *duty* to marry, and soon, so as to assist their survival. These friendly, cheerful women sitting around her, ready to do their Christmas duty to the poor of the canyon, would slowly move themselves around her until it was all inevitable. The earlier she moved on her own, the more choice she would retain.

"Tessa has other things to worry about than my son, or even Zabeth's." Alta Dalhousie appeared, a signal for chairs to be pulled back and coats put on.

Alta smiled and took Tessa's arm. Despite her formidable reputation, Alta Dalhousie herself did not look particularly imposing. She was shorter than Tessa, and slight, with a mass of curling gray hair and bright blue eyes.

"Dalka's coming with us?" Alta was serene, willing to put up with irregular requests as long as they didn't interfere with any of her plans.

"Yes." Striving to imitate Dom, Tessa bit down on any following phrase like "I hope that's all right," or "she really wanted to." It left her feeling anxious, as if there was a hole in the conversation. How did Dom do it so easily? Dalka joined them at the front door.

For a moment, the women stood and laughed in the cold air of the courtyard, adjusting their hoods, tugging on their embroidered gloves, exuberantly swooping their long sleeves. This was a dignified assemblage, gathered for the purposes of charity to the weak and poor, but it was a glorious day nonetheless, the sun bright, the world sensible. Their children were gathered in their front rooms eyeing the presents left by the Traveling Kings in gratitude for assistance on their journey, their husbands were sleepily contemplating a day free of labor, and they themselves were happy to be doing good in such high style.

Tessa, Alta, and Dalka crossed a teetery plank over an ice-filled ravine, carrying heavy packs. Their mission was to the isolated houses that hid themselves in the cliff-base jambles and the high cracks at Pakor and Brant Spurs, far above the easy cart roads. Alta went first, to scatter sand, which she kept in a blue-enamel bucket on the livethorn fence. She used a small silver shovel with a delicate tracing of leaves up its handle and fork tines at its edge, so that the sand spread evenly. Then they climbed up the trail, over the root bulges of the hairy-barked oaks that



grew in a line along the ridge, now almost thick enough to be cut down and turned into furniture, an old Dalhousie skill. It was steep and icy enough that Tessa considered stopping and pulling her crampons out of her pack. Instead, she reached out and took Dalka's gloved hand in hers. Together, the three women formed a snake long enough that at least two of them were always standing on firm ground. They writhed their way up the icy slope.

"We don't go up there," Swern Toroma said, snipping off a length of binding cord with an attachment on his hand. He had not stopped working the entire time he spoke, as if to show by the frenzy of his activity how little he really needed their help.

"But have you seen them?" Tessa asked.

He shook his head. He was slender and pale, and looked much like his sister Fila. "I don't see them. No reason to."

Tessa, Alta, and Dalka stood close together, fastidious in the midst of the messy kitchen. Swern's wife, a woman from up canyon, was not around, but it was clear that, whatever her duties were, they didn't extend to cleaning.

"You talk to your sister." Tessa was insistent. Somehow, she thought, Fila had told her brother about the nature of Gorr's wound, perhaps in a moment of unwise confidence. Swern had used that information against Gorr at the last trading expedition.

Swern glanced at her suspiciously, then returned to his task. "And why shouldn't I? With a husband like that . . . but I haven't talked to her in the last few days. And you know what? I hope that bastard ran off, killed himself, whatever. Then maybe she could bring the land back to the family." He gestured with his rigidly splayed fingers at their basket. "They don't deserve your help up there."

"That is not for you to decide," Alta said. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be all right when I get my land back."

A baby started crying in a back room. Attempts to shush it just made the crying louder.

"Good day, then," Alta said crisply. "Thank you for your hospitality." The three women left, and resumed their climb up the slope.

"It's a sad situation," Alta said, as they climbed through the piled rocks of the jambles. "The Toromas were once a proud family."

"Richer than now, maybe," Dalka said. "But never rich. It's hard, high near the wall like this."

"Harder when the better part of your land leaves," Alta was making some sort of point, Tessa wasn't yet sure what. "It went with Fila, on her marriage to Gorr. Fine, it was settled on her, she was the most responsible. Still—"



"Do you think it should have been handled some other way?" Tessa asked.

"The inheritance?" Alta thought about it. "It is natural that the land should pass through the daughter, of course, but still . . . Swern and his family barely survive. Meanwhile, Gorr and Fila make little of their land, so that they're poor also. When it finally passes to Malena, its value will be much lower than it would have been. Swern, with help, could work it, but there's too much anger. So he spends his energies in manipulating the negotiations—keep this quiet, I'm not supposed to know—so that others don't get full value for their produce."

Tessa was pleased by the confidence, though she doubted she was the only one Alta had told, and suspected there was a reason she was being told.

The three women walked up to the silent, shuttered Merewin house, and knocked on the door. The sound echoed hollowly in the narrow cleft where the house hung, but there was no answer. They knocked again.

Frost had grown over the cracks of the door and the sides of the shutters. There was no mark of footsteps in the frost on the front stair. And no one had built a castle.

Alta was grim. "I was afraid of this." She looked up at the sheer walls of the cleft.

"They went for a walk!" a small voice called.

"Is that you, Malena?" Tessa said. "Where are you?"

"They went for a walk. You can leave that."

The women descended the slope from the house to the beginning of the terraced gardens. Two large trees flanked the entrance to the cleft, twining around the rock outcroppings. Tessa peered up into them and finally spotted the tiny Malena, who sat placidly on a high branch.

"Hi, Malena," Tessa said.

"Hi." Malena was as solemn as ever. Her legs dangled down.

"How long ago did your parents leave?" Alta asked.

"Not long. But they said don't wait. Just leave it, they said."

The wind blew through the top of the cleft with a high, lonely whistle. It was cold, but Malena seemed quite comfortable on her perch. Tessa wasn't even sure how she had climbed up there.

"Malena," Alta said. "Could you please come down?"

"No!" Startled by the request, Malena scrambled up another branch, small enough that it sagged even under her tiny weight. "I have to wait for Momma and Poppa."

Dalka knelt and put the tray on the front stair. "Do you promise to eat this if I leave it?"

"We'll eat it!" Malena's voice was ragged, a little frenzied. "They'll be back soon. Then we'll eat it."



The reeds she had gathered from the pond the previous morning were stacked neatly against the side of the house. The land around them was silent.

"All right, Malena," Alta said. "Say hello to your parents when they return."

"Okay."

The woman climbed back down the path until Malena was invisible behind them.

"Something's happened," Alta said. "I don't know what. Fila's run off, Gorr's done something. They may not be coming back."

"Gorr's done for Fila," Dalka said with grim relish. "Finally."

"Maybe." Alta thought. "Tessa, do you think Perin knows anything?"

"They haven't spoken in years."

"Yes, I know. I had hoped that, perhaps, recently . . . well, that leaves Old Man Lewis. He must know something." Alta stared up at the cliffs. "Finding him is something else again, of course. Do you know where he is, Tessa?" Her voice grew sharper.

"I saw him, yesterday." Tessa felt as if she was betraying a confidence, though Lewis had been out on the pond for all the world to see.

"But not since."

"No," Tessa said. "I can try to find him. Meanwhile, Malena's terrified. What shall we do?"

"I'd knock her out of that tree with a broom," Dalka said. "She's not coming down otherwise."

"Dalka!" Tessa said, startled. "You don't mean that."

"No, I don't." Dalka was reluctant. "She'll get hungry and come down on her own. Then we can get her."

"Excellent," Alta said vigorously. "Then we'll bundle her up—the poor thing must be freezing—and take her over to Dalhousia. We have a spare room, Tramt is over in Perala this term and I'm sure he won't mind." She eyed Tessa. Alta was testing her, Tessa realized, waiting for her reaction to this seizure of Malena.

Dalka stuck out her heavy lower lip. "No need for you to take care of her."

"Who else will? The Toromas?"

There was little answer to that, though they were probably her closest relatives.

Dalka glanced at Tessa and shrugged. "Well, if you want to take the trouble. . . ."

Dalka was putting up the effort for her sake, Tessa realized. For the Wolholmes. If Malena ended up at Dalhousia, eventually the management of her land would also, at least until she reached her majority. Dalka was not interested in land herself, but she knew what Tessa



needed. At the moment, Tessa didn't care. She remembered the tiny girl clinging to the upper branches of a tree in winter, her parents most likely lying dead somewhere unknown, with no one to help her, and no comfort but a cooling tray of food brought by distantly dutiful neighbor ladies.

"She can climb down and go into the house if she wishes," Alta said. "I checked, and the key was hanging under the stairs. If we just leave her alone—"

"I'm not leaving her up there alone. She's a little girl!"

"Good idea," Dalka said. "We're through, aren't we, Alta? Tessa can stay up there with her."

"As you say." Alta was brisk. "We'll be back soon, Tessa. Keep the poor thing company, keep her out of trouble."

When they were out of sight, Tessa headed back up to the Merewin house. Despite herself, she sympathized with Dalka's urge to swat Malena out of her tree with a broom. There was something exasperating about the little girl's stubborn refusal to be helped. As she crested the hill, she searched the branches for Malena's tiny dark shape. The branches swung free in the breeze. The food had brought her down, then.

Tessa crouched and moved more quietly, as if stalking some wild animal. The air moved gently over her. The high cliffs rose above, their cracks outlined by snow and frost, a few desperate plants clinging to them. As she went, she examined the farm with a practiced eye. There was some evidence of decay—cracked pipe plants ready for infection, inadequately insulated roots—but nothing too dangerous yet. A little extra work in the spring could take care of it.

She squinted into the shadows of the cleft. The tray was gone from the front stairs. Tessa walked slowly to the house, looking carefully around her. The girl was tiny, and clever. If she wanted to hide, here on her own ground, it would be difficult for Tessa to find her. But Tessa herself had been a champion at hide-and-seek as a girl.

Tessa reached under the stairs, found the key, and opened the door. "Malena?" she called. The girl was gone.

Tessa searched slowly through the house, looking carefully. There was a family picture on the wall of the living room: slender Fila looking attentively at Gorr, his hand on her shoulder as he stared at the camera, and tiny Malena, ignored, sitting at their feet and looking off at something out of view. The girl's space in the house was tiny, just a bed that folded into a corner so as to be out of the way during the day.

A shelf above held a few toys, neatly laid out in a row. Tessa picked up a bulge-eyed duck with wheels. Its head bobbled back and forth as she held it. Spots of paint had flaked off. She set it back. There were no empty gaps on the shelf. Even Malena's favorite loose-headed doll sat floppily in its place.



The house was in frantic disarray. Drawers were pulled out in the bedroom, clothing strewn on the floor. Personal objects had been yanked out of cabinets. It didn't look like a simple matter of slovenly housekeeping. Everything was clean. The floor under the piles of sweaters and pants was buffed to a dull shine, not a spot on it. Sora herself could not have found fault. Someone had been searching for something in a frantic hurry. Had it been found? Tessa continued, hoping to find the place where the search had ended.

Cutlery and spices were tossed about the kitchen. A dented tea kettle lay in the corner. And in the sink, some sort of dark liquid. Scattered along the sink's edge were the sort of seedpod ampoules that Dalka used for dispensing medications. All were crushed, and the liquid oozed out of them. Tessa ran a finger down the thick whitewood sink and sniffed: a bitter smell that she could not identify. Half the kitchen was a mess. In the other half the cook pots and wood bowls stood in perfect arrangement, ready to be of service.

Tessa gathered several of the empty seedpods, and as much of the liquid as she could in one of Fila's food containers, and put it in her pack. Perhaps Dalka would be able to recognize what it was.

The back door of the kitchen opened into the pantry and the back storage area. Tessa poked around back there, though she felt that she had already found what was significant, even if she did not understand it. All the food was in order in the pantry, all the equipment in the storage area, ready for spring.

Sunlight glinted in through the window. It was late in the morning, the only time direct light made it into the cleft. She was about to turn away, to head home, when a gleam of metal caught her eye. She stepped forward. Hanging from a nail by the door, returned by the one who had borrowed them, was a pair of ice skates.

Alta Dalhousie stood in her courtyard and poured steaming tea from a towering urn. Search parties found their leaders, warmed themselves up, and headed out through the gates. Most of Calrick Bend was here, and despite the seriousness of the cause, they carried with them some of the conviviality of Christmas, strengthened by their common energy.

"Ah, Tessa." Alta poured for her as well. "You must be cold."

"Any sign?" Tessa drank slowly, trying not to burn her tongue. Warmth pulsed outward from her throat.

"None. But how far could a little girl go in such a short time? After all, you only had your eyes off her for a few minutes."

Tessa felt herself flush, and was glad that Alta had turned away as she said this, to add more hot water to the urn. Tessa—childishly—wanted to point out that Alta and Dalka had been chattering away too, while



Malena escaped. That might annoy Alta, but it wouldn't alter anything. And Tessa needed Alta in as friendly a mood as possible.

"She did seem to vanish most thoroughly. Here, could you help me with this?" At her direction, Tessa carried wrapped bread, still warm from the oven, out to tables in the courtyard. "Most unusual. She's only five, and even the most energetic five year old has no stamina for distance. I remember when Margen tried to run away, we were in a panic, then found him on a vine trellis in the next field, eating his sandwiches as if he hadn't had food in days . . . but that was nothing compared to this."

Tessa was not going to tell Alta that Lewis had taken the girl. Lewis was tolerated in the canyon, but not truly trusted. Those search parties could easily turn to a grimmer purpose.

"Will you be going home now?" Alta was easy. "You must be tired."

"No, I . . ." Tessa thought about what to say. "Gorr and my father were friends. They were in the war together."

"They stopped speaking around the time Malena was born, didn't they?" Alta headed off Tessa's argument before she had even gotten to it. "Perin hated Gorr's anger. And good for Perin."

"But Malena—"

"Perin also disapproved of the way Gorr cut the Toromas off from their land," Alta continued serenely. "Gorr had the right, having married Fila, but still . . . it wasn't a good idea, do you think? Hatred is a poor basis for cooperation."

"So you think Swern and his wife could farm that land on their own?" Tessa thought she was starting to get an inkling of where Alta's argument was heading.

Alta laughed. "Oh, no, dear. Not at all. Any more than they could raise Malena. But still, they should be able to work more of the land than they do. . . ."

"I'm sure that whoever adopts Malena will allow that." Tessa was making a political agreement on behalf of her family. She'd have to explain it to them later. "It only makes sense. As long as the result does not alienate the land from the proper owner."

Alta eyed her. "Have some sweet bread. You look hungry."

"No thank you. I should—"

"Really, Tessa. I made it myself. I think it came out rather well."

Alta Dalhousie, Tessa estimated, had been making sweet bread for at least twice as long as Tessa had been alive. She *better* have figured out how to make it come out well. She took a slice, smearing sugar frosting on her hands. If the tension hadn't been making her feel sick to her stomach, Tessa conceded to herself, it *would* have been good. Her mother,



Sora, had had a tendency to fear underbaking it, and as a result it had always been dry. At least she hadn't slathered it with so much sugar.

"Tell me," Alta said. "Do *you* know where Malena is?"

"No," Tessa said. "But I think I can find her." The last words came in a rush.

"When all these search parties can't?" Voices sounded on the path outside: searchers coming in for a break, some tea, some of Alta Dalhousie's famous sweet bread. They stacked packs at the gate. Someone made a joke, and a couple of them chuckled.

"Yes."

Alta smiled. "Well, if you find her, you may as well keep her, right? Since Perin and Gorr agreed. And the Toromas can no doubt be persuaded."

Tessa stared at her in wonder. "I—"

Alta waved a hand dismissively. "We can discuss it later. We both have things to do." She turned to the search party, and began to pour them tea.

It was late, and the mountains cast their long shadows across the farms of Cooperset Canyon. The air grew colder, and Tessa longed to move. Her blood felt as if it had pooled and crystallized. She shifted on her rock outcrop, and once again examined the Pong's Defile trail, just visible through the jambles below.

It was time to get home before the trail disappeared beneath her feet. Lit house windows already glowed in Calrick Bend, far below her. A moving line of lights descended the opposite canyon wall on a switchbacked trail. Searchers, returning empty handed from their pursuit of a vanished little girl. Tessa had to find her and Lewis before the townspeople turned to searching for *him*.

Perhaps he wasn't going to come tonight . . . but still she sat, watching her breath puff into the steadily darkening air. Pong's Defile, up to Born Canyon, was Lewis's favorite trail. The Wolholme children had always known it. Lewis had taken Tessa some way up it when she was a child, a well-remembered first trip away from the settled logic of the canyon floor. And a trail at the edge of Cooperset Canyon, clinging high above any habitation, led straight to the cleft where the Merewin house stood.

Nothing of Malena's had been taken from the house, not her clothing, not her favorite doll, not any of the food she liked to eat. She was no doubt suffering in silence, wherever Lewis had taken her, but he would know what she needed. No one was at the Merewin house but the neighbor Lessa Tergoran, and she would most likely be asleep by now.

Tessa pulled on the chain of logic, and it held. She only hoped it was actually attached to something.



Had Alta Dalhousie actually offered to allow Malena to be adopted by the Wolholmes if the Toromas were given access to the land? It felt that way to Tessa, though the sliding implications of Alta's offer had left Tessa dizzy. But it all made a kind of sense. If the Dalhousies themselves tried to adopt Malena, the Toromas would fight, but the rights of Perin Wolholme in the matter were well known. The solution did not actually benefit the Dalhousies, but it didn't harm them either, and settled several problems in the bargain. And it left Tessa in Alta's debt. Alta Dalhousie had always taken the long view.

That is, if Tessa managed to find Malena, and Malena herself agreed to the solution. Were things really so complicated in Calrick Bend? Tessa had never realized.

She heard a purposeful chuffing of breath on the trail below her. She swung out precariously on her rock, supported by her fingertips, and looked down the trail. The dark figure, head down, shoulders hunched, could only have been Lewis. She looked into the darkness below her feet. She'd scoped it out before, decided that a jump would be easy, but now the earth seemed to have been swallowed up, leaving her with nothing to land on.

She drew a breath. Lewis paused and raised his head. Tessa jumped. For an instant it seemed that she had indeed been right, that the ground had vanished, then it slapped her feet. She almost lost her balance, then regained it, and darted forward.

Lewis stood calmly and waited for her.

"Good evening, Theresa Wolholme," he said.

"Hello, Lewis."

"You want to ask me a question."

"What have you done with Malena Merewin?"

He turned, gestured, and she found herself walking with him, slightly behind, down the trail. She thought about putting on her head lamp, but he seemed to have no trouble finding his footing. She followed his lead.

"I haven't done anything with her. Koola has done with her. I just live here."

"Lewis!" She grabbed his shoulder and tried to swing him around. Despite the light boniness of his frame, he was immovable, as if his feet interpenetrated with the rock beneath them. "She's a little girl. She's lost her parents."

"They're not lost," Lewis said craftily. "No. We've got some absolute coordinates."

"Are they dead then?"

"Their journey is over."

Tessa felt despair at his Koolan obstinacy. "Lewis. You can't keep her."

"I'm not keeping her!" He didn't shout, but his voice grew less precise.



He waved his arms. "The suns burn with their own fires. Their messages take forever to reach us, but reach us they do."

Darkness had come completely, and the clear sky was bright with stars. Tessa stared up, wondering if he could see the star around which circled the flaming Simurad Tunnels. The wind blowing down the canyon grew even colder.

"All good places are hard." Lewis had calmed down. "They slide into the flesh. Unite us."

"Lewis!"

He sidled away. "The human world has rejected her. Koola accepts her. Accepts her with gracious hardness."

"We aren't rejecting her," Tessa said in despair. She thought of the tug-of-war that Malena would return to, the tensions that pulled the net of social relations in Calrick Bend tight. And she thought of the solemn little girl in the tree, waiting for her parents to come home and knowing they never would. "We need her."

"Koola needs her more! She'll learn the ways, as I have. She'll climb to the heights."

For an instant, he almost convinced her. Malena could go with her war-uncle, learn to sleep on bare rock, to eat the edible lichens of the cliffs, to walk unafraid through the blizzards. Lewis would bring her to it, with love. It was a life as sensible as any other, more sensible than some.

"Lewis," Tessa said. "Malena did not live through Simurad. Does she need to live through this?"

For the first time, she felt she had reached him. He peered at her.

"Perin has his own service to perform for Gorr's daughter," Tessa said. "So do I. I need to talk to her. Please."

"Climb, then. Show who you are."

"Will you talk to us?"

"Us?" Lewis seemed puzzled. "Who us?"

"The Wolholmes. All of us. You know who we are."

"I'm cold," Lewis said. "It blesses my flesh. Bring Perin, if he will come. We will talk."

And with that, he was gone. He jumped up, slid over a rock, and disappeared into a silent void. Fingers shaking, Tessa pulled out her head lamp and clipped it onto her forehead. The beam showed dark-shadowed rocks and sternly undecorative plants, but Lewis was nowhere to be seen. She held her breath, but heard nothing but the wind.

Tessa began to slowly pick her way down the rough path toward home.

Dom bent over and adjusted his sister's snowshoe. Tessa had thought



it was set fine on her foot, but he had another opinion. She looked ahead, at the trail that led up into the high end of Born Canyon.

"We'll be side-stepping up that slope," Dom said. "It'll be easier if it doesn't slide so much at the heel."

"You'd know that if you did much winter hunting," Benjamin said in a superior tone. "We can loosen it again at the top of the slope."

Perin said nothing. He was clearly already tired, unused to the exertions of climbing the higher canyons in midwinter, but had voiced no complaint. He wiped his red, sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, then looked up into the heights. Tessa heard the ragged pull of his breath with sorrow. Her father was growing old. Hadn't she noticed that before?

Dalka, though of an age with him, seemed unaffected by the climb. She had insisted on coming with them. She and Tessa had not had a chance to talk in private, and Tessa didn't know when they would.

"Let's *go*," Benjamin said. "We've got to move." He moved upslope with little steps, jerking his head like an animal straining against a leash. "You know where we're going, Tessa?"

"Just up Born," she said. "They're up there, somewhere." But how high? They would see.

When the going got difficult, as it did here, they roped themselves together and moved slowly. The sun was deceptively bright, glaring on the snowfields. The snowfields weren't deep: there was never much water in this part of Koola, even in winter, but they were deep enough to impede travel.

"We don't usually hunt this high at this time of year," Dom said, with the air of confiding a male secret. "The game comes lower, which actually makes it easier for us than in the summer."

"Ben didn't make it sound that way."

Dom snorted. "Well, he comes up here to prove something, not to hunt. That's dangerous, but he's been doing it since that wapiti got away from him in the summer. Hunting's not for proving, it's for food, and for fun. Or maybe I'm just saying that because I'm getting old." He turned and pointed. "But hunting helps in everything. There, those dark spots? A couple of Lewis's footprints, I think. Even he can't cross a snowfield without leaving a mark, though some people think he flies. We're still going right."

As they climbed, the countless slopes and cliffs opened out around them, their edges sharp and blue in the moody winter light. Tessa wondered what it would be like to live and farm up here, far from the density of the lower canyons. She'd heard old stories that it was possible, that at some time not long after the initial settlement of Koola, people had lived at these heights, not yet having descended to the flood-prone depths of the canyons and subdued them.



They reached the top of the steep slope and unroped. Tessa readjusted her snowshoes before Dom could come over and do it for her. He nodded his approval when he saw, thus retaining some control over the situation. The land curved gently up from this point, up to the base of a vast vertical cliff about a mile away. The top of the cliff, thousands of feet up, was cleft into three, with the middle bastion the highest, hence its name: Telena's Foot. Tessa had caught glimpses of it in the warmer months, but she had tended to climb well down-canyon. This was good territory for hunting: men's country. Women tended to stay away from it so that they would not be interrupted and annoyed during their strolls by the wails of dying animals.

"Dalka." Dalka had fallen back, and now she and Tessa were far enough away from the others to talk. "What was in those seeds?"

"Lessa Tergoran, left on watch at the Merewins', says she was attacked by ghosts last night. The house was filled with them. Actually, she fell asleep. I know her. Lewis could have lifted the entire house and taken her with it. She would never have stopped snoring."

"Dalka—"

Dalka was silent for a moment, her face stony. "Damn it, Tessa, you do give me the most difficult things, did you know that?"

"I'm sorry."

Dalka shook her head. "The High Plainsmen. They must be behind it. I see no other way."

Tessa was surprised. She looked up the canyon, toward the heights behind which the High Plainsmen lived. "Why do you say that?"

"That liquid must have been the way Fila controlled Gorr's fungal infection. It's a fairly simple enzyme blocker, keeps the fungus from spreading but doesn't kill it. Topical application, fairly straightforward. I don't think it will be too hard for me to duplicate."

"Then what—"

"I didn't make it for her! And I don't know who did, or who she got it from."

"But you think it was Lewis."

Dalka nodded. "But Lewis didn't make it. That's not his way. He got it from someone else. Someone high up-canyon. And he gave it to Fila, to control Gorr, as if he were some herd animal himself."

Tessa remembered the argument Dom had recounted for her, during the trading trip. "Swern Toroma told Gorr about it, just before all this happened, about the infection, about Lewis."

"Ah." Dalka thought about it. "It was the balance between them, that infected wound of his. Her stake."

"If he strayed from her, he would die."

"Exactly. And that, in the end, was how he punished her."



It took a moment for Tessa to realize that she'd lost track of the logic. "I don't understand."

Dalka smiled. "You don't think Fila dumped the treatment in the sink, do you? She knew exactly where it was, she didn't need to search the house for it. No, it was Gorr. Gorr, when he found out how he had been controlled, came home and destroyed his treatment. Without it, he would die, slowly and by degrees. I might have been able to help him, I don't know. He didn't give me a chance."

"He never thought about Malena," Tessa said.

"Indeed he didn't. And he never would have, his whole life. The only person who was important to him was Fila. She was the beginning and the end. As long as *he* was in control, not she. To find that, for all those years, she had held his life in her hands . . . he punished her. Punished her by taking away her control."

"And dying." Tessa looked up the slope. A jambles lay at the cliff's base, with high square blocks sticking up out of the snow. "That was how he punished her."

"She always did love him, whatever else there may have been."

"He came up here to confront Lewis," Tessa said. "He must have decided where the treatment came from."

"And Fila followed. What else could she do?"

"And what happened then?"

"That," Dalka said, "is something only Lewis can tell us."

The jambles under the cliff turned out to be the foundations of an ancient manor house, most of its structure long vanished. Tessa looked at the chisel marks on the hard rock and wondered who had built here, so long ago, and why. She climbed up on the highest part. The view down the canyon was tremendous. She could see Fulda's and Angel's Buttes in the distance, on the other side of Cooperset. The successive ranges of mountains that made up the Boss were crisp in the cloudless sky to her right.

Benjamin bounced around the rocks like an enthusiastic dog, but Tessa noticed the care with which he kept his feet on rock, off snow or soil that might hold some track or other evidence of their quarry.

Ignoring his son's outraged protest, Perin walked right into the middle of what had once been the cellar.

"Lewis!" he called. Silence. "Lewis! It's me, Perin Wolholme. I want to talk." He turned to the rest of them, who stared silently at him. "Could the rest of you please go a ways back down the slope so that we can talk, Lewis and I?"

"He hasn't even answered you," Dom said, irritated. "He's probably not even here. Why should we—"



"Please, Dom. He won't answer to a crowd, which is what we are. You know that. It won't take long, one way or another." He pointed off to a rock outcropping about a quarter mile away. "There. You can all have your lunch. It's a nice sunny spot." Perin was as decisive as Tessa had ever heard him. His tone did not accept argument or contradiction.

Dom shrugged. "All right. But look here: there's been digging at the base of these rocks." Indeed, the snow had been disturbed and there were traces of dirt in it.

"I'll discuss that with Lewis when he appears," Perin said. "Tessa —could you stay? I may need you."

"All right, Poppa." Everyone else headed out into the snow, not saying anything, Dalka most reluctantly. Tessa watched them go.

Perin stood in the middle of the foundation, black against white, not moving, staring up at the looming Telena's Foot. After a long few minutes, he bent and slung the pack from his back.

"Here, Tessa," he said. "I'm going to ask you to do some work."

He pulled out a shovel, handed it to her, and pointed to the disturbed snow and earth that Dom had noticed. Tessa accepted it. At least it would give her something to do. She started digging carefully.

Tessa warmed up as she worked, but suddenly she felt lonely. Usually she liked being alone, but not now, not with her father standing nearby, staring off at the cliffs, ignoring her. She cocked her head. Her brothers and Dalka were enjoying a companionable lunch on the outcropping, chatting over something. Probably something completely irrelevant, she thought jealously. Something that had nothing to do with life and death and adoption and land. Perhaps Dalka was retelling the story of Lessa Tergoran, mimicking her vigorous snores. Ben picked up a double handful of snow and let it glitter away in the breeze.

Something had appeared under the snow. A hand, frozen half-clenched. Tessa stared down at it, then began to dig carefully around, revealing the arm, the shoulder, and finally the head of Gorr Merewin. The details of his body were mercifully obscured by the snow. Fila lay next to him, with a wide cut in her chest.

"Perin. You shouldn't have come."

Tessa looked up from her grim labors. Old Man Lewis stood facing her father.

"I had to come, Lewis. You know I did."

"Why?" Lewis's voice was a wail of pain.

"She's not yours to take. I'm not dead. If I were, then my children too would have the choice of going with you. But I'm still here."

"This is her place. There is no other for her. Gorr—"

"Lewis!" Tessa was surprised at the strength in her father's voice as he faced his old comrade in arms. "This is intolerable. Where is she?"



"Safe." Tessa had never seen Lewis this sullen. Usually the words of people were as the wind for him, but Perin's words clearly had an impact. Lewis would have liked to disregard them, but he couldn't.

"Let me be the judge of that. Bring her out."

"But—"

"Bring her out, I said. You have breathed the air, drunk the water, eaten the earth, and slept on the rock of Koola, but you are not free of us all. Lewis!" Perin reached out his hands.

Lewis did not move away, but he did not respond either. Slowly his white-haired head rose. "You want to haul her back, hide her in a house, tear her away from her place. Is that better than the life I lead here?" Lewis spoke gently, almost humorously. "Don't speak, I know your answer. We have a duty to Gorr's blood. Both of us."

"You're right." The reluctance in Perin's voice was clear.

"Both of us. We swore, there in that flaming place. Didn't we?"

"We did." Perin spoke to Tessa over his shoulder. "Keep digging, Tessa. We still need them." He turned back to Lewis. "But if you keep her the people of the canyons will hunt you. They won't catch you, not you, Lewis, but they will hunt you because they will hate you."

Tessa resumed her excavation of the two frozen bodies. Gorr's face was peaceful. Had he died of the fungal infection? Aside from the wound on her chest, Fila's body was unmarked.

She brushed snow away from Gorr's face. The disfiguring mark of the fungus was gone. He had died, and it had no further use for him. It hid, somewhere in the bloody snow, and awaited another host. Her hands were gloved. She should be safe from infection, since it needed to penetrate the dermis to have its effect. Still, she moved away.

A shadow fell across her digging. Tessa looked up. Malena stood above her, staring down dispassionately at the bodies of her parents. Tessa almost jumped up, to grab her and screen her gaze, but stopped herself.

Malena looked at her. "They're dead, aren't they?"

Something caught in Tessa's throat, and she could only nod.

"Lewis told me . . . but I didn't see them. He dug them under himself. They loved each other very much."

"They loved you too, Malena."

"Not as much."

Malena jumped down and suffered Tessa to put her arms around her and hold her. She was wearing a hodgepodge of clothing, none of it adjusted properly, but, like Lewis, still seemed warm.

"Lewis wants me to live with him," Malena said.

"And what do you want to do?"

Malena looked up at her. Her dark eyes were wide. "I want to be with my parents."



Tessa did not glance down at the frozen bodies. "No, Malena."

Malena sighed. "They didn't want me anyway. They wanted to be by theirselves." Malena reached down and cast a handful of snow across her father's dead face. "They didn't even build a castle for the Kings. They were too busy and so the Kings passed us by."

"The Kings looked in on you, Malena. They always do, to make sure all the children are asleep. They don't need a castle to stop by."

Malena was not to be consoled. "We didn't even have a little one."

Lewis and Perin appeared above them.

"Malena." Lewis could not hide the despair in his voice. "You must choose. I was wrong."

The little girl sat down and crossed her arms, ignoring all of them. She was the same age as Kevin, now safely at a neighbor's house, being spoiled. She held her body tightly, as if the intolerable pressures on her were indeed physical, and she was being compressed into a space too small to live in. Tessa squatted down in front of her and looked her in the eyes. "I'm sorry, Malena. You shouldn't have to make decisions like this. No one should."

"I'm all right." Malena's tone was resentful. Arms still crossed, she looked away from all of them, off across the valley to the mountains beyond. "Tessa?"

"Yes, Malena?"

Malena switched her gaze to the ground. "Tell me what to do."

"I—" Tessa didn't know what to say. She looked up at the two men who loomed over her and the little girl. Perin was carefully expressionless, Lewis sad and weary. Tessa was half tempted to let Malena stay with him, so that she could learn the ways of the Shield's heights and stay completely pure, like snow and rock.

"We will adopt you. The Wolholmes. Poppa and I, and Dom and Benjamin and Kevin. Will you allow that?"

"Yes." The girl's voice was the barest whisper.

"Good." Tessa kept her voice brisk and efficient. She was getting some understanding of why Alta Dalhousie enjoyed being who she was. There was a joy in making such significant decisions, much like the feeling of jumping from a high rock down to the distant ground.

"And Lewis." She looked up at him, wondering what consequences her next decision would have. "You'll have her too, as you deserve. The canyons will not claim her entire. Malena will come to you, up here. Is that something you want to do, Malena?"

Malena looked up at Lewis, the only person who had evidenced any interest in her own personal fate, and nodded silently.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with that, Lewis," Tessa said.

His head moving in time to Malena's, Lewis nodded also.



"But can we do that?" Crisis over, Perin was once again tentative. He looked down at Malena as if he had never seen her before. "What about—"

"Alta Dalhousie will agree," Tessa said briskly. "As long as we grant the Toromas some use of their old lands."

"Oh." Perin was still puzzled, but willing to accept his daughter's decision. "Well, that's all right then. The others will want to know." He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

Benjamin didn't realize that there was any mystery at all. He hugged Malena, who tolerated it, then jumped up on the rocks. They'd wanted to find her, and they'd found her, and it was a noble success.

Dom was more suspicious. Decisions had been made in his absence, significant family decisions. He accepted them, but now Tessa regretted having acted in such haste. She should have talked to him . . . but there hadn't been time, everything had moved so fast. She'd have to make it up to him later, if she could.

Dalka knelt down by Gorr and Fila. "How did they die?"

"He came up to see me, to find out why I had been giving her the medicines," Lewis said. "And to forbid me to do it any more. She came after him, much faster. They fought. He was weak, dying, but they fought, and she let him cut her, as she had cut him. The fungus went right into her, deep, even deeper than the skin. She died quickly, even more quickly than he. And after, when I found them, he had decided that his journey was over. I asked about Malena." Lewis sighed. "He barely knew who I meant. Perin and I were to decide. I decided for Perin." He looked at his old friend. "I was wrong."

"Now we bury them," Perin said. "We can't take them to the burial ground at Topfield until spring. So shall we build them their winter house?"

His family looked around at the high, inhospitable cliffs. They had all been looking forward to getting somewhere lower in altitude before night fell.

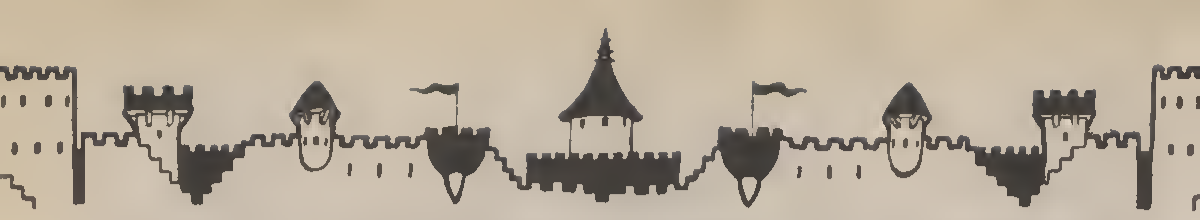
"They are family," Perin said. "It is our duty."

And it stakes our claim to Malena, Tessa thought, but did not say. It felt entirely too cold-blooded.

Perin knelt, gathered a small clump of snow, and began to roll it. "Time to get to work."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Tessa laughed and clapped her mittened hands. "Let's go, Dom! Bet you I can roll a big one faster than you can."

Dom shook his head. "God. What a family I was born into." Then he bent over and began to roll his own snowball.



"Tessa!" Perin whispered piercingly. "Tessa. Get up, it's almost dawn."

"I'm awake, Poppa." Tessa rolled out of her sleeping bag. Malena, who had been sharing it, got out without a sound. Tessa had listened to her steady breathing during the night, wondering if she slept.

It had been a cold night, and Perin had slept none of it. After he had sent his children to bed he had stayed up. In brief waking moments, Tessa had heard him wandering around the snow structure, adding things to it, spraying it with catalyst-warmed water to freeze in the cold night air. He'd obviously planned for this. Dom had already left his own bag without waking her. She crawled out of the tent.

A dark shape bulked in the predawn darkness: the snow structure that Perin had built for the bodies of Fila and Gorr. They were below it now, encased in ice.

"Dom!" Tessa called. "Help me get this tent down." The air was sandpaper-cold. She felt it abrading her exposed skin.

Dom bounded up, thrust a cup of steaming tea into her hand, and took down the tent before she could say anything more.

Morning light filtered around the peaks. They all stood as still as they could in the cold.

"Oh, Poppa," Tessa said. "It's beautiful!"

"That's not the point, is it?" Perin said, pleased in spite of himself. "Not the point at all. But they might as well have what I can give them, right? What I can give them."

Two days after building his magnificent structure of cake for the animals to eat, Perin had built one of ice and snow to be melted by the spring sun. It thrust up from its base in the old foundation stones. Delicate, ice-encased spires gleamed above heavy, crenelated walls. The front of the castle had huge, claw-tipped paws, as if the entire building was some gigantic, frozen animal.

Tessa sipped her tea, feeling it go quickly cold.

"Well, that's it then, isn't it?" Perin said briskly. He picked up his pack. "We'd best be down quickly. Everyone has to be told."

"But, Poppa," Tessa protested. "We can't just leave—"

"We can. We can and we will, Tessa. It's just something to keep the scavengers away from them. That's all it's for." He turned away from it without another look, tightened his snowshoes, and started down the hill.

Dom, Benjamin, Dalka, Malena, and Tessa followed, Tessa in the rear. After taking a few steps, she stopped and turned. The castle was in full light now, gleaming as if dropped from some other world. The dark shape of Lewis moved across the tumbled rocks above it, as he walked slowly into the dark and icy mountains beyond others' knowing.

Tessa turned back and hurried to catch up with her family. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The big Halloween con(vention) weekend is coming up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me with a Filthy Pierre badge, making music.

OCTOBER 1993

15-17—**NecronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569.** Or phone: **(813) 677-6347 (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect).** Con will be held in: Tampa FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Airport. Guests will include: Lois McMaster Bujold, Peter David. General SF/fantasy.

15-17—**NotJustAnotherCon. (413) 545-1924.** U. Mass, Amherst MA. Kennealy, C. Skinner. SF/fantasy.

15-17—**Battlestar Galactica 15th Reunion. (206) 745-2700.** Universal City Hilton, Los Angeles CA.

16-17—**Political/Economic/Historical Wargame Con. (717) 774-6676.** At The Embers in Carlisle PA.

16-17—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562.** Radisson Inn, Duluth MN. Comic book show. No guests planned.

22-24—**CovenCon. (913) 384-7154.** Kansas City MO. A convention for fans of the Dark Shadows show.

28-31—**DreamCon, 10121 Evergreen Way #103, Everett WA 96204. (206) 283-6090.** Quality Inn.

28-NOV. 1—**World Fantasy Conv., Box 2126 Loop Stn., Minneapolis MN 55402.** Bloomington MN.

28-Nov. 1—**HansaCon, Marwitz, Box 1524, 2070 Ahrenburg, Germany.** CJVM House in Luebeck.

29-31—**MapleCon, Box 20235, 390 Ridaau St. E., Ottawa ON K1N 9P4. (613) 235-0771.** Chimo Hotel.

29-31—**2nd Masquerade, Box 325, 612 C. H. Mall, Camp Hill PA 17011. (717) 691-0670.** Gaming.

29-31—**Vampire Circus, % Box 136300, Chicago IL 60613.** Media- and (of course) vampire-oriented.

29-31—**Somewhere in Time Weekend, Box 1556, Covina CA 91722. (818) 810-1203.** Mackinac I., MI.

29-31—**UCon, Box 4491, Ann Arbor MI 46106. (313) 741-8559.** Gaming meet, with a horror emphasis.

NOVEMBER 1993

5-7—**NovaCon, % 121 Capa Hill, Smethwick Warley B66 4SH, UK. (021) 556-0997.** Angus, Birmingham.

5-7—**SF Days, % Siriusz, ul. Dolna Panny Marii 3, Lublin, Poland.** Call 249-07 or -27 Tue. 6 to 9 PM.

6—**UniCon, 14301 Yale Ave., Irvine CA 92714. (714) 724-6750.** One-day con emphasizing SF & fantasy.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg M6 R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. $85/C$95 to 9/30/93.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersaction, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Con. $85 to 9/30/93.

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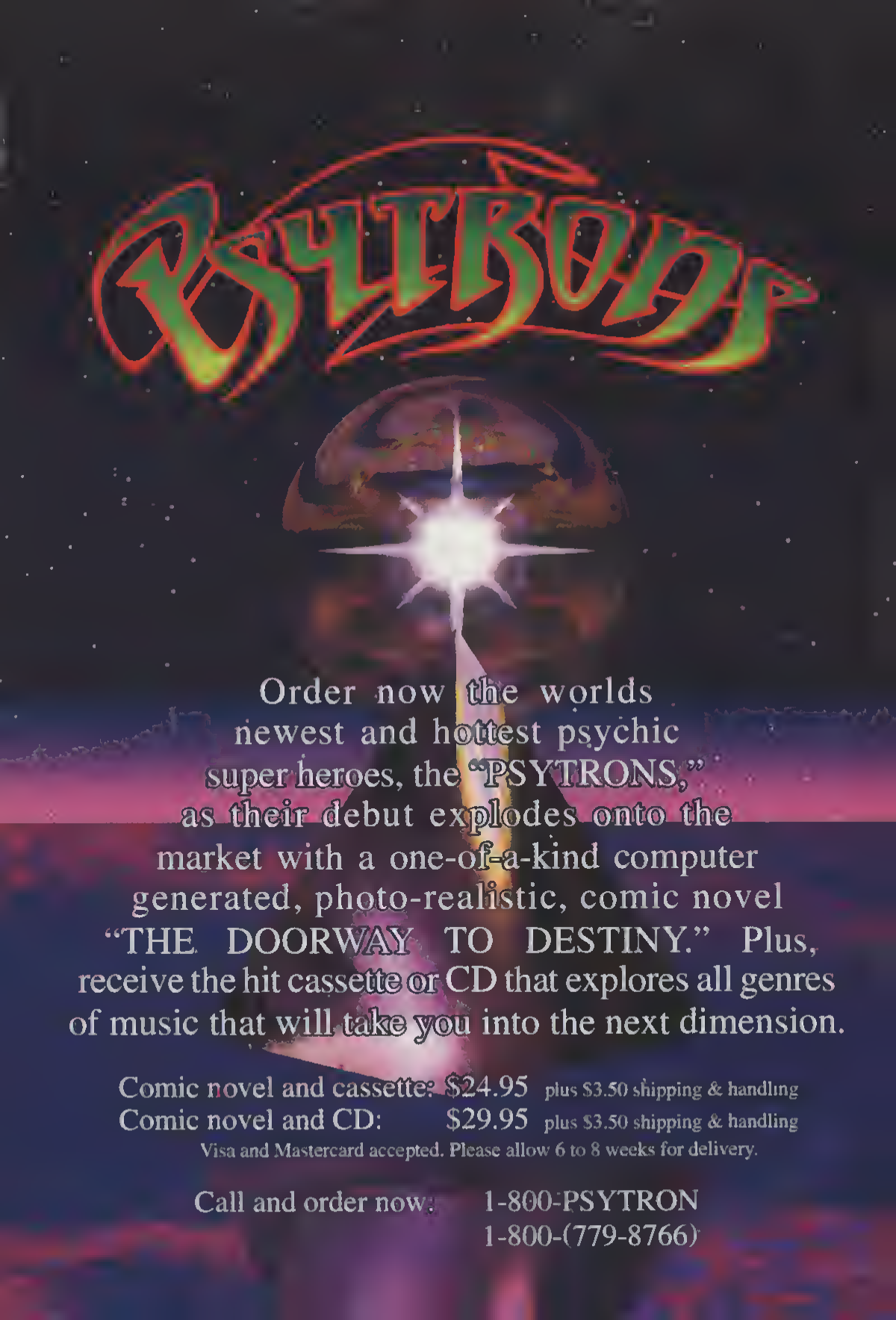
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